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Demolition Men: Contemporary Britain and the Battle of Brutalism

Susannah L. Grossman

University of Pennsylvania, susannah.grossman@gmail.com

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Demolition Men: Contemporary Britain and the Battle of Brutalism

Abstract

This thesis examines the contentious legacy of brutalist architecture in Britain. Once the lingua franca of post-war architecture in the UK--demonstrating the principles of modernism advocated by high-profile European architects like Le Corbusier as well as socialist ethics--brutalist architecture's legacy in Britain today is both reviled and revered. The paper, by surveying three major buildings that are classified as "brutalist": Alison and Peter Smithson's Hunstanton Secondary Modern School, Erno Goldfinger's Trellick Tower, and Denys Lasdun's National Theatre, intends to demonstrate the enduring importance of brutalist architecture in Britain. By examining the difference between architectural history and architectural heritage, and by evaluating popular and professional criticisms of Brutalism, this thesis ultimately concludes that the preservation of brutalist buildings must be undertaken in order to protect an important chapter in the history of architecture and planning in the United Kingdom.

Keywords

brutalism, brutalist, architecture, Britain, England, Banham, Trellick, Hunstanton, Poundbury, Art History, David Brownlee, Brownlee, David

Disciplines

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Demolition Men:

Contemporary Britain and the Battle of Brutalism

A senior thesis submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts
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Department of the History of Art
University of Pennsylvania

By

Susannah L. Grossman

Advisor: Dr. David B. Brownlee

Philadelphia, PA

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As always, I could not have embarked on the writing of this thesis (or do anything at all) without help from my mother and father, Sandra and Daniel Grossman, and my brother, Michael Grossman.

This thesis is dedicated in loving memory to my grandfather, Seymour Grossman (1920-2003) and my uncle, Alan Grossman (1953-2003.) Both were gentlemen and scholars alike.

Amo, amas, amat, amamus, amatis, amants...

....It is necessary to create an architecture of reality...an art *concerned with the natural order*, the poetic relationship between living things and environment. We wish to see towns and buildings which do not make us feel ashamed, ashamed that we cannot realize the potential of the twentieth-century, ashamed that philosophers and physicists must think us fools, and painters think us irrelevant. We live in moron-made cities. Our generation must try and produce evidence that men are at work.

--Alison and Peter Smithson, *Architectural Review* editorial, April 1954

Art produces ugly things which frequently become beautiful with time.

--Jean Cocteau, 1960

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Introduction, or Whose Vision of Britain is this, Anyway?

In March of 2005, the British television network Channel 4 announced its plans for a new, groundbreaking television series dedicated to examining how typical Britons responded to the spaces around them. As a counterpoint to the network's hugely successful *Restoration* series produced several years earlier, where men and women from myriad ethnic, social, professional, and educational backgrounds voted to decide which of Britain's buildings should receive restoration, Channel 4 proposed the most logical alternative treatment: *Demolition*. Now, rather than deciding which of Britain's tarnished architectural jewels should be saved, the British public had the opportunity to decide which buildings made everyday living miserable, and should face the wrecking ball. Co-sponsored by the Royal Institute of British Architecture, and co-presented by RIBA president George Ferguson, the *Demolition* series elicited thousands of votes from the British public.

Naturally, inhabitants of the second-most urbanized country in the European Union would speak volumes about the buildings that shape their lives: which ones they thought were more indicative of urban blight than urban promise—which structures, public and private, symbolized the worst aspects of the built environment. Channel 4 and the RIBA invited the British public to scrutinize any form of architecture—be it a public landmark, private housing development; dilapidated or brand new—and the more controversial, the better. George Ferguson, his co-presenter, architectural critic Kevin McCloud and the show's producers encouraged the British public to identify the structures that were most offensive to the senses; the buildings for which “eyesore” was actually a term of endearment. No structure could be too sacred or off-limits. The *Demolition* program professed the desire to democratize architectural criticism and city-planning, and so encouraged the diverse British public to air their grievances

about their surroundings. The series promised to be an outlet for countless frustrated Britons: people tired of seeing their town centers as cause for shame rather than civic pride; afraid to use bus or railway stations for fear of getting lost or encountering undesirable elements of urban life; people trapped in their cars on colorless motorways crisscrossing the country; those who hated going home to high rises or council estates.

As a brand new resident of the United Kingdom in the winter of 2004-2005, I read accounts of the program's inception and production with a sense of disbelieving amusement. Could the Royal Institute of British Architects be serious? How could a professional organization composed of Britain's top architectural talents encourage the public to decry the fruits of their labor? Although the program became little more than a mouthpiece for Ferguson's desire for an "X-list" of public buildings—a mechanism through which members of the public could recommend buildings for demolition just as they could for restoration—I was surprised by what I perceived to be irresponsibility in the shaping of public taste. I (rightly, I would soon discover) assumed that, while national icons such as St. Paul's Cathedral would be safe from criticism, experimental and contemporary structures would soon find their architectural merits debated by a public that probably didn't know how to look at them, or care to learn otherwise. The program, in other words, taught people to dislike some buildings based upon previously established assumptions about architecture that function as conventional wisdom.

While the producers of *Demolition* promised to review each case that received many votes with the proper amount of respect and scholarly inquiry, I had my doubts that the program would turn into little more than excuse for teasing misunderstood Modernism, quirky Victorian buildings or features of the British landscape that were not consonant with Prince Charles's so-called "Vision of Britain," or not in line with the current trendiness of Norman Foster's High

Tech. After all, even if the members of the British public sent in their votes, the show's supervisors would have the most important input of all—deciding which cases received the most attention. Not only did the concept of *Demolition* cause problems for the loyalties of the architects working on the show, the program could not really accurately represent the public's taste—evenhandedness does not make for compelling television. Additionally, could George Ferguson and his ilk—members of the very architectural elite the program claimed to want to teach a lesson in civic building and public desires—bridge the gap between professionals and laymen and really present the public's assertions fairly?

The answer was no. The results of the public's votes were bewildering in both their diversity and their similarities, but unfortunately this was not represented in the treatment presented by the *Demolition* team. Almost every type of public building found a representative on the *Demolition* shortlist—as the show's producers termed the profiled structures, “The Dirty Dozen”¹—a housing complex, transport center, civic building, etc. The British public did not discriminate in its disapproval of building types—buildings designed for every conceivable function of modern life were nominated. However, nearly all of the buildings nominated, though created to serve wildly divergent purposes, had one thing in common: the style could be termed “Brutalist.”² From the Gateshead Multistorey Carpark in Newcastle to Park Hill, a council estate in Sheffield, **(Figures 1.1-1.3)** Brutalist buildings were subjected to the most vitriolic abuse from the British public, in the annals of architectural journals, mainstream media outlets, and of course, on the World Wide Web. Channel 4's invitation to nominate the buildings that oppress

¹ www.channel4.com/demolition

² Ibid. A notable exception that proved equal parts interesting and embarrassing for the producers of *Demolition* was the inclusion of Enric Miralles's building for the Scottish National Parliament on the “most-hated” shortlist, despite its having won the RIBA Stirling Prize earlier that year.

the lives of the British public rather than serve them quickly appeared to be an invitation to complain about buildings erected in the postwar period.

That fact was not a surprise at all. The merits of Brutalist architecture have been debated since its inception, by its very nature encouraging the strongest of reactions from those who encounter it. Brutalist architecture uncompromisingly announces its presence in the built environment—such was their stated purpose. A product of the artistic flowering that overtook Britain in the years after World War Two, Brutalism is an architecture of strong forms and strong materials, committed to providing the landscape with buildings that are vital and essential to its beauty. Buildings in this style sometimes crouch on the horizon, aggressively confronting those who come into contact with them. They are unfailingly monumental and cannot be missed or ignored. The term “Brutalist” itself contributes to this perception; it does not conjure up images of charming Tudor homes or stately Georgian terraces; the term is antithetical to an architectural lexicon that includes phrases like “picturesque.” It is architecture conceived in moral and aesthetic opposition to the revival of twee vernacular styles that occurred directly after the second World War, and utilized a distinctive roughness in its stylistic forms as part of its ethos. It demands recognition as revolutionary. Brutalist architecture is polemical—first developed by young architects eager for a new avant-garde worthy of their talents and shocking enough to displease their mentors; it is nothing if not a polarizing architecture. Love them or hate them, brutalist buildings unforgettable visual images: heavy masses of poured, exposed concrete, glinting glass and steel, reaching skyward or composed of asymmetric clusters. They force the viewer to react to their presences, and do not politely merge into the background landscape.

Although primarily associated with the functions of contemporary living, such as parking decks or warehouses, Brutalist buildings also provided new spaces for living and learning.

Empowered both by the possibilities presented by the European high modernism that emerged in the generation before, as well as by the concern for public life by a postwar government dedicated to improving the quality of life, Brutalist architecture meant to change the way men and women lived and moved. An innovative architecture married as much to a desire for social change as to aesthetic invention, Brutalist architecture emerged from a Britain that had returned from the brink of destruction during the Second World War, and reflected its struggles to rebuild itself as a strong nation. Young architects, with the blessings of the new Labour government's social welfare policies, looked to Continental examples of high modernism in order to find a new aesthetic vocabulary that would both reflect Britain's tenacity in the war, and serve the public good. Brutalist architects used rough, exposed concrete for their buildings' exteriors and made no secret of the technology encased within; they combined striking visual imagery with an appreciation for new possibilities offered by technological and building advancements. Brutalist architecture confronted the landscape rather than accommodated it. The language of Brutalist architecture spoke to a Britain that had endured and that was ready to progress forward through the twentieth-century—a Britain that had survived the ravages of bombs and blitzes.

Architects such as Alison and Peter Smithson, Owen Luder, James Stirling (who loaned his name to the most prestigious prize in British architecture, the RIBA Stirling Prize), Ernő Goldfinger and others looked to the experiments in public housing created by Le Corbusier in order to find inspiration for Britain's own housing development problems. They looked to the Parisian avant-garde of Jean Dubuffet and *art brut* in order to find a visual language with which they could articulate their social concerns, and found parallels for their art in the literature of the so-called "Angry Young Man" and in rough-hewn "kitchen-sink drama." Most significantly, they turned away from the trends of the "townscape picturesque" endorsed by their teachers and

mentors in the pages of the *Architectural Review*³ and tried to reassess the implications of the terms “modern” and “Modernism” in order to confront the problems and issues faced by Britain at the crossroads between destruction and creation. M. Christine Boyer writes

The younger generation of postwar architects set out to look for a new set of principles on which modern architecture could stand; principles that reflected the humanistic concerns of the time. Looking back in order to move forward they began to re-evaluate the heroic period of modern architecture in the 1920s and 1930s and to understand that its forms and images were more complex responses to social and cultural concerns.⁴

In so doing, architects who came to be known as “the New Brutalists” re-energized their profession and the British landscape. Although they encountered their critics and difficulties within their own philosophies of ethics and aesthetics, the best Brutalist architects tried to maintain the balance between High Art and the quotidian aspects of life. Like the Smithsons, who identified with the members of Britain’s working classes, Brutalist architecture sought to become an architecture for the masses: avant-garde and accessible, unmistakable in its aims to cater to typical men and women.

So, how ironic it is that now, more than fifty years after the construction of what is considered the first “Brutalist” building, namely the Smithsons’ Hunstanton Secondary Modern School, and after defining the face of Britain’s architectural landscape for a generation, Brutalism’s position in the canon of architectural history has been questioned in the eyes of both the public and the architectural elite. The rhetoric used to describe Brutalist buildings in the course of Channel 4’s *Demolition* series did not differ from one speaker to the next; the videotaped pleas for help from members of the public and the critiques offered by the show’s panel “experts” used the same hyperbole when describing the nominated structures. Brutalist

³ Banham, Reyner. *The New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetic?* New York: Reinhold Publishing Corporation, 1966, pp. 13-14.

⁴ Boyer, M. Christine. “An Encounter with History: the Postwar Debate between the English Journals of *Architectural Review* and *Architectural Design* (1945-1960).” Paper presented at “Team 10—Between Modernity and the Everyday,” Faculty of Architecture TU Delft, June 5-6 2003. www.team10online.org.

buildings are being demolished in droves: Owen Luder, whose Gateshead Carpark was previously mentioned, saw his Tricorn Shopping Centre in Portsmouth demolished in March 2005 after the town's council voted unanimously to destroy it rather than renovate, and the tower blocks that surrounded St. Paul's in London's Paternoster Square have also fallen. Despite the sincerity of Brutalism's moral agenda and despite the artistry that mark its finest hallmarks, brutalist architecture is all too readily dismissed as ugly or monstrous in its monumentality. In many ways, the results of Channel 4's public poll merely confirm *Guardian* columnist Stuart Jeffries's assertion that "the battle for Britain's architectural soul is being won by the weedy commercializers, the soulless jumbler, the devotees of tired and trusted British vernaculars."⁵

Unhappy with the perceived failures of Modernist housing, tired of the sight of concrete and glass, the British public's dissatisfaction with Brutalist architecture raises some important questions about the validity of its legacy. If Brutalist architecture is so hated in Britain today, how did it become so popular and predominant during the period of its heyday? When did this happen, and what caused it? Did Brutalism die in the eyes of the public when "Modern Architecture" died in the 1970s?⁶ Bad brutalist buildings—ones constructed quickly and cheaply, without the finesse of the Smithsons or Stirling, with the elements of its visual vocabulary either lazily or poorly applied—have ruined the reputation of Brutalism as a whole in the minds of the British public. Brutalism's advantages and disadvantages can be judged fairly, but the question of by whom still remains. The publishers of architectural journals and the members of the profession's establishment encourage the public to view it in the most simplistic terms possible, as evidenced by Channel 4's *Demolition*, while the public themselves are eager to

⁵ Jeffries, Stuart. "The Joy of Concrete." *Guardian Unlimited* (London), March 15 2004.

⁶ In his book *The Language of Postmodern Architecture*, Charles Jencks writes: "Modern Architecture died in St. Louis, Missouri on July 15, 1972 at 3:32 PM (or thereabouts) when the infamous Pruitt-Igoe scheme, or rather several of its slab blocks, were given the final *coup de grâce* by dynamite." (Jencks, Charles. *The Language of Postmodern Architecture*, 4th rev. ed. New York: Rizzoli, 1984, pp. 9)

rid their towns of unsightly structures, regardless of their artistic merits. And what should be made of Prince Charles as an arbiter of architectural taste and judgment?

I will examine these questions throughout my discussion of Brutalist architecture. I have envisioned the question of Brutalist architecture's legacy—the role it played in Britain's architectural history as well as the role it continues to play as part of Britain's architectural heritage—a battle. Somewhere amidst the endless theorizing and debates about the importance of Brutalist architecture that occur in the pages of architectural journals such as the *Architectural Review* and *Architectural Design* and the editorial columns of the *Guardian* and the *Times*; somewhere between the treatment Brutalism receives in textbooks on architectural history and in the dissatisfaction of those living in dilapidated high-rise housing schemes, lies a fair evaluation of Brutalism's flaws and good qualities. By looking some of Brutalism's most prominent examples and discussing them against the backgrounds of various historical and cultural contexts, I hope to discover some reasons for Brutalism's contested reputation in the lexicon of British art, architecture and culture.

Central to these questions about the merits of Brutalist architecture is the issue I have stated in the title of this introduction. If Brutalist architecture meant to establish a peculiarly British aesthetic to match the specifics of its landscape and the distinctive qualities of its inhabitants, then whose vision of Britain determined what was “British” about British art and architecture? Does the most cogent argument for the legacy of art or architecture lie within the conviction of the architect or artist, its critical reception, or its public reception?

Critic Reyner Banham, one of the key theorists of Brutalism, realized the discrepancies that emerge in public and critical opinion over time. In discussing the Park Hill housing estate in

Sheffield (Lynn, Smith and Nicklin, 1961) which he claimed was the “building that is as big as the sociology [that inspired it],” he writes

Opinions are divided, even so, about what happens to the human presence on this [building’s] scale. Serious critics like Lewis Mumford believe the scale of the block to be inhumanly vast, others decry the social concept (which meant so much to the young architects who conceived it) as mere ‘matiness.’ Only time and research would really show whether either objection is justified, and the results of the research that has been done seem, as usual fairly ambiguous.⁷

Banham differentiates between “serious” critics and others, as well as implicitly criticizing those who would find themselves too easily blinded by incidental details and fail to see the broader social picture painted by Brutalist architecture. Although time and research have shown that the reactions toward Park Hill and other projects are anything but ambiguous, Banham begs the question: who judges the “seriousness” of critics, who qualifies as a critic, and who has the right to shape the conventional wisdom?

In the first section of this thesis, I shall examine the origins of Brutalist architecture by reviewing British building and architecture immediately following the end of the Second World War. By using the archives of the *Architectural Review* and *Architectural Design*, the two journals that encouraged the most discussion about the rise of “the New Brutalism,” I will illustrate the inherent problems associated with the term Brutalism, the program of its ethics and aesthetics. I shall also look at the inherent problems as examined by Banham in his 1966 book *The New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetic?*, and explain how architects who subscribed to the Brutalist program found favor and lucrative contracts by allying themselves to the social policies outlined by the British government. By using the example of Alison and Peter Smithson’s Hunstanton Secondary Modern School in Norfolk (1949-1954) as the prism through which to examine the issues of the New Brutalism, I will explain how Brutalist architecture came to represent, for those who truly believed in the sincerity of its social aims, Britain moving *vers une*

⁷ Banham, Reyner. *Age of the Masters: A Personal View of Modern Architecture*, 1st US ed. New York: Harper & Row, 1975, pp. 142-143.

architecture of its own, separate and distinct from both the heroic Modernism of Le Corbusier and other European architects, and from the examples of British architectural history.

In the second section of this discussion, I shall examine the intersection of popular culture, conceptions of taste and the problems that arose as a result of the British government's social programs against the backdrop of Erno Goldfinger's Trellick Tower in London (1968-1972), also known as either the "Tower of Terror," or "Colditz in the Sky."⁸ By looking at the construction and renovation problems that befall architects using exposed concrete and the other stylistic hallmarks of Brutalist architecture, as well as the records of public opinion in popular literature and music, I will demonstrate how Brutalist architecture, uncompromising in its vision, either fails or succeeds in its aims, and why such totally different fates affect different buildings. Using Prince Charles, Léon Krier and Andres Duany's Poundbury in Dorsetshire as a counterpoint to the condition of urban living as envisioned by Goldfinger, I will attempt to compare the Brutalist vision of Britain with the picturesque one, and determine why one seems, at the surface, more appealing than the other.

Finally, I will examine the case of Denys Lasdun—knight of the realm and architect of some of Britain's most hotly contested architectural landmarks such as the National Theatre in London and the University of East Anglia. I will explore what critic William J.R. Curtis terms "a particular vision of architecture and a search for certainties in a time of confusion and flux,"⁹ and how, even though ascribing to many of the principles established by the practitioners of Brutalism, Lasdun found a language and an aesthetic all his own. I will look in particular at the National Theatre—its original construction and its more recent renovations—and how the

⁸ Wood, Gaby. "Reach for the Skies." *The Observer*(London), August 11 2002.

⁹ Curtis, William J.R. *Denys Lasdun: Architecture, City, Landscape*. London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 1994, pp. 17.

changes in public opinion regarding the structure indicate overarching trends in contemporary architectural taste.

Brutalist architecture, in the words of critic James Dunnett, creates a “terrible beauty.”¹⁰ It is in the very unconventional methods and forms that Brutalist architecture uses that its most inspired and sublime monuments can be found. Despite its current reputation in Britain, Brutalist architecture remains an integral part of British architectural history and heritage—the monuments dotting towns from Hertfordshire to Newcastle demonstrate its dominance. By re-considering some of Brutalism’s most successful experiments and some of its least successful experiments in the context of Britain’s social fabric, it is my intention to retrieve the merits of Brutalism—even if my personal vision of Britain fails to align with that of Prince Charles, George Ferguson, or Channel 4.

¹⁰ Dunnett, James and Gavin Stamp. *Ernö Goldfinger*. London: Architectural Association Press, 1983, pp. 7.

Images



Figure 1.1: Gateshead Multi-Story Car Park, United Kingdom

Owen Luder's 1961 building was named "Britain's Ugliest" in a 2000 poll conducted by the BBC. Its appearance in the much loved Michael Caine film *Get Carter* is largely responsible for saving it from demolition. (*Photos by Andy Williamson, copyright 2001*)



Figure 1.2: Gateshead Multi-Story Car Park, side view



Figure 1.3: Parkhill Housing Estate, Sheffield, United Kingdom

This housing estate (1957-1960, Ivor Smith Architects) has been granted listed Grade II status by English Heritage, and cannot be demolished. It was the only listed building to appear on Channel 4's poll. *(Photo by George Ferguson, copyright 2005)*

A Machine for Learning: The Hunstanton Secondary Modern School and the Smithsons' Sentimental Education

From its inception, “The New Brutalism” begged more questions about its stylistic and ethical program as a new architectural vocabulary than it answered. Conflicting accounts of its true origins, which Reyner Banham attempted to resolve in the opening pages of his 1966 *The New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetic?* were borne out in the pages of the *Architectural Review* and *Architectural Design*, and other periodicals of the profession. Before any credit could be given to the vision of Britain’s postwar reconstruction articulated by the young generation of architects by their architectural superiors and by the general public, the attitude “The New Brutalism” affected towards the British architectural tradition had to be examined and pronounced valid by the architectural establishment. However, since so much of “The New Brutalism” relied on reactions against the architectural *status quo* established by the leading scholars and theorists of the post-war period—figures like Rudolf Wittkower and Nikolaus Pevsner, who not only advocated architectural programs that young designers felt were out of touch with their ideals, but also influenced the perception of architecture in the populist realm—“The New Brutalism” faced more challenges than many other artistic movements in its attempts to garner influence. The most heated debates regarding the validity of “The New Brutalism” as a movement—whether or not its aesthetic vocabulary matched its ethos as articulated by Alison and Peter Smithson and Reyner Banham; whether or not it reflected appropriately “British” architectural values; etc., occurred in the *Architectural Review* and in *Architectural Design*. In these pages, “The New Brutalism” would be dissected and defined, and it was in these periodicals that Brutalist conceits about style and morality would be disseminated to the general public. In many ways, the debates that surrounded Brutalism during the post-war period, and its origins, would

define “The New Brutalism” almost as much as the buildings that were eventually given that label.

Although the cohesion of the movement that is still known as “Brutalism” would endure much debate about its aesthetics, purposes and functions, as well as suffer from the malady of inaccurate theorizing—what Reyner Banham termed “a program or attitude to architecture” rather than a mere visual program for architecture—the movement’s members would find harmony in one thing: disappointment with the architecture that emerged in Britain immediately after the end of the Second World War. The urgency of rebuilding Britain after its near-destruction was not in question, but the state of “modern architecture,” and the question of how to represent accurately a nation in flux became a real debate, in the somewhat conservative, J.M. Richards-edited *Architectural Review* and *Architectural Design*, which would ultimately “function as the mouthpiece for the younger generation of architects...[who] set out to look for a new set of principles on which modern architecture could stand; principles that reflected the humanistic concerns of the time.”¹¹

For Alison and Peter Smithson, the two figures whose ascendancy into the world of architecture most closely paralleled the rise of the “Brutalist” aesthetic and ethical program, the post-war cultural climate in Britain allowed them to search for an architectural ethos that would match their desire for new design directions. Despite the defense of the so-called “townscape picturesque” that emerged immediately after the war years in the building of the New Towns that proliferated in British suburbs during the period and in the 1951 Festival of Britain¹², the Smithsons and others rejected what they perceived to be its outmoded notions of British and

¹¹ Boyer, M. Christine. “An Encounter with History: the Postwar Debate Between the English Journals of *Architectural Review* and *Architectural Design*, 1945-1960.” Paper presented at “Team 10—Between Modernity and the Everyday,” Faculty of Architecture TU Delft, June 5-6 2003. pp. 142

¹² Landau, Royston. *New Directions in British Architecture*. New York: George Brazillier, 1986, pp. 23.

class identities that they felt had no place in Britain's post-war configuration. Nikolaus Pevsner, author of the influential *Pioneers of Modern Design*, had at first been considered a figure sympathetic to the desire for new and dynamic architecture in Britain; architecture that would equal the greatness of the original modern designers. However, statements in the *Architectural Review* sympathetic to watered-down modernism, such as "to make townscape requires an architect wholly in sympathy with today, but at the same time sensitive to the character of a site and the character of what he finds standing on it when it starts,"¹³ signaled that Pevsner and his contemporaries in the architectural establishment were out of touch with the aims of the new generation of post-war architects. The emergence of new trends in both the political and artistic spheres allowed the Smithsons, in whose early designs the fundamentals of what eventually would stand for "The New Brutalism" were explored and ultimately codified, to locate an *architecture autre*, or an architecture that evolved logically from the principles outlined by visionaries like Le Corbusier. They aimed to move past what they perceived were just developmental steps in an architectural history that evolved organically from its predecessors without outright innovation.

After the publication of the Beveridge Report in 1942, which advocated systems of social security, insurance, housing and healthcare for all Britons, as well as the election of Clement Atlee and his Labour government to lead Parliament in 1945, the stage was set for the arts to follow the new social program. As Anne Massey writes,

With the establishment of the Welfare State, free health treatment and better education for all, the concept of art and design that were part of the general prescription for the nation's health emerged. Paternalistic official bodies were founded to promote an appreciation of high culture which also celebrated the British national identity and appropriated elements of the avant-garde. There was a widespread consensus of

¹³ Pevsner, Nikolaus. "Picturesque: An Answer to Basil Taylor's Broadcast." *Architectural Review*, April 1954, pp. 228.

opinion among the various official bodies, partially because they had worked closely together under different titles during the war.¹⁴

Central to the marriage of the avant-garde in arts to the progressive values of the new Labour government was the linking of social policies regarding housing and public life with the aesthetics of building for the public. This provided the backdrop for the Smithsons and others to articulate their desires for a fresh visual ideology—one that would reflect the rich backgrounds of Britain’s myriad inhabitants, while simultaneously emulating the notions of universal, heroic building for universal, heroic men advocated by Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe and others. If the Beveridge Report advocated a minimum standard of living, “below which no one should be allowed to fall,”¹⁵ then architects felt themselves responsible to provide physical solutions for the lofty social aims exhibited by their political representatives.

Although this seems to be a paradox—architects desiring an architecture that could meet the needs of a universal Man like the one laid out in *Vers une Architecture*, and yet one that would suit the development of a distinctly “British” architecture, ahistorical yet satisfying the specific needs of people—the architects who would eventually call themselves “The New Brutalists” were able, through their buildings and writings, to reach a comprehensive architectural ideology. They formulated an architecture that spoke the language of working-class Britons in its overall elemental design and use of materials “as found,” while still paying heed to the humanistic principles articulated by their architectural forebears in Britain and outside, and the desire to reflect the general spirit of British heritage through its landscape.

The willingness of government agencies to sponsor building competitions allowed young architects to develop and experiment in real ways that were previously unimaginable in the

¹⁴ Massey, Anne. *The Independent Group: Modernism and Mass Culture in Britain, 1945-1959*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995, pp. 6.

¹⁵ <www.nationalarchives.gov.uk>

crucible of the architecture professions that was pre-war Britain. As socialist visions for better public housing and planning, schools and even churches arose in the wake of the devastation wrought by the war, so too did the visual avant-garde begin to reflect these concerns.

Ultimately, many graduates of the forward-thinking Architectural Association, and other programs that encouraged breaking away from the cautious modernism of the immediate post-war years found employment with government agencies and worked on government projects. The London County Council, founded in 1888, and eventually succeeded by the Greater London Council in the 1966, sponsored the construction of many structures during this period. The importance of a social vision for architecture became the foremost concern for planners, designers and developers. While the picturesque advocated by Pevsner and Colin Rowe may have been visually appealing on a superficial level, it lacked the visceral appeal of the socialist utopia envisioned by many public figures in Britain—artists, architects and politicians alike.

At first, however, the Smithsons and others had difficulty finding outlets for their ideas. This fact did not escape contributors to the *Architectural Review*, and was used against the Brutalists as proof that they had no clear vision for their own designs, merely complaints for current ones. They soon found their aesthetic vision matched by a political one as the 1940s wore on and gave way to the 1950s and 1960s. As the formation of the Independent Group in the 1950s, and their subsequent exhibition of “Parallel of Life and Art” at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London in 1953 illustrates, the concerns of the avant-garde architects were matched by those of contemporary artists such as Richard Hamilton, Nigel Henderson and Eduardo Paolozzi: a way to reconcile the trauma of the war years and the roughness of modern living with the growing rise of consumerism and appeal of popular culture. **(Figures 2.1-2.2)** They saw in Le Corbusier an appreciation for both the roughness of vernacular forms and

peasant life in his use of exposed concrete, and for the efficiency of machine-age technology, and they endeavored to find a language that could similarly encapsulate the diversity of modern Britain.

Reacting against what they perceived to be twee and compromising architectural trends, the Smithsons cited continental, Modern heroism—particularly that of Le Corbusier—and used it as the philosophical template for their commissions. This involved, in Reyner Banham’s words, an aesthetic for architecture that signified

...the building as a unified visual image, clear and memorable; clear exhibition of its structure; a high valuation of raw, untreated materials... Brutalism is thus a taste for self-sufficient architectonic objects, aggressively placed in their surroundings; it is an energetic affirmation of the structure, the revenge of mass and plasticity over the aesthetics of matchboxes and cardboard; it aims to profit (on the basis of historical study but outside academic categories) from the lessons of Modern Architecture stripped of all literary excuses. It is a method of working, certainly not a recipe for poesy.¹⁶

The New Brutalist architecture aimed to reflect the values of a Britain—a nationalist myth and a nation of change—that had survived the atrocities of war. The New Brutalism grew and blossomed alongside Britain’s policies of social welfare, and culminated in the construction of buildings that were important even before the first acre of land was cleared. The Smithsons and the other members of Team X, the collective of like-minded architects spearheaded by Peter Smithsons, were able, once they secured commissions from the government and won competitions for new buildings, to illustrate these essential elements of the New Brutalist architecture. Their architecture would combine the *art brut* of Dubuffet and the Parisian avant-garde with the *béton brut* advocated by Le Corbusier. For the Smithsons and others, the New Brutalism “represented a revolt against many of the characteristic features of post-war British architecture, the lack of rigor and clear-thinking, the romantic pastiches of the Festival of

¹⁶ Reyner Banham, *The New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetic?*, pp. 127.

Britain and its offspring, the free, empirical manner derived from Sweden and the loose handling of prefabricated elements in works like the Hertfordshire schools.”¹⁷

Looking to the example of Le Corbusier’s Unité d’Habitation in Marseilles (**Figure 2.3**) as an articulation of their visual and social aims, the Brutalists found a prototype that stood for everything they hoped to achieve, albeit in a European, rather than British context. The marriage of concern for the quality of life for the working-class men and women with an interest in using industrial materials as economically and as well as possible is explicit in this building. Le Corbusier strove to meet the needs of the modern worker and provide him with the necessary space to live, work and play in comfort. By creating a building that served the needs of the individual and encouraged the growth of a true community, Le Corbusier successfully drove modern architecture back onto its grand course by bringing beauty into everyday living. Summing up the Smithsons’ appreciation for this model, Banham quotes Le Corbusier’s most provocative and emotional statements from *Vers une Architecture*: “‘L’Architecture, c’est, avec des matières brutes établir des rapports émouvants’. To construct moving relationships out of brute materials was to be the central ambition of Brutalism.”¹⁸ Le Corbusier’s vision for a new Europe helped motivate the New Brutalists and gave a vision worth emulating.

Though it may have taken some time before the aims of the new Brutalists were clear enough in the opinions of their critics at the *Architectural Review*, the proponents of townscape picturesque and those who doubted the veracity of High Modernism’s aims a generation before, their criticisms were soon assuaged by the appearance of Alison and Peter Smithson’s Hunstanton Secondary Modern School (1949-1954). With the blessing of the Labour government, the Smithsons now had the opportunity to construct the edifice that would stand for

¹⁷ *Architectural Design* (London). “Thoughts In Progress: the New Brutalism.” April 1957, pp. 111.

¹⁸ Reyner Banham, *The New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetic?*, pp. 16.

all their principles—aesthetically and ethically—and display what the new Brutalism could do. Even before its completion, it was judged by the architectural establishment to be the building that would change the debate about modern architecture in Britain. The building represented a rethinking of architectural theory in general—not merely in Britain—and generated considerable excitement from the moment Peter Smithson submitted his plans to the Ministry of Education in 1950.¹⁹

Designed with a view towards efficiency and economy while still meeting the needs of schoolchildren, the Hunstanton building embodied strict clarity and little mystery as to function. It contained a “peculiar ruthlessness”²⁰ in its insistence upon an overall asymmetrical plan accented by symmetrical elements in order to provide the building with an overall proportional rationality. It truly was a machine for learning. Its classrooms, accessible by stairs only and not set along narrow corridors, were thus sheltered from noises that might disturb children, while the spaces created by and in between the masses of its rectangular volumes offered places for play.

Philip Johnson writes

[All the elements] were conceived, from the very first...as performing structurally, functionally and decoratively as parts of an integrated architecture. This imposes an existential responsibility upon the architect for every brick laid, every joint welded, every panel offered up...²¹

The success of the Hunstanton School, then, granted legitimacy to the New Brutalism as an architectural movement of aesthetic and engineering innovation, as well as a kind of social ethos, where political and philosophical ideas about the nature of living could be explored.

Although at first glance, the glass, brick and steel components of the building—as well as their structural exposure—seem to have more to do with Mies van der Rohe’s Illinois Institute of

¹⁹ Bullock, Nicholas. *Rebuilding the Post-War World: Modern Architecture and Reconstruction in Britain*. London: Routledge, 2004, pp. 98.

²⁰ Johnson, Philip. “School at Hunstanton: Comment by Philip Johnson as an American follower of Mies van der Rohe.” *Architectural Review* (London), September 1954, pp. 152.

²¹ Ibid.

Technology campus, with little to no ornamentation, than Le Corbusier's Unité where *béton brute* was used as decoration, it becomes clear that the school's structural elements actually serve as its ornamentation, thus combining elements of both Mies and Le Corbusier. The necessary water tank becomes a monumental tower; the open pipes industrial sculpture. In Nigel Henderson's photographs that accompanied Philip Johnson's review of the building in the April 1954 issue of *AR*, (**Figures 2.4-2.6**) it becomes apparent that poesy could indeed be achieved by the attentive use of industrial materials. Within the strict rectilinear arrangement of forms, such as the blank lightness of the brick on the outer façade, accented by exposed steel framing, a kind of volumetric grace is achieved within the building's gestalt—each element is necessary and appears as such. The Hunstanton School represents the attempt to create “the masterly, correct and magnificent play of masses brought together in light;”²² an architecture that suffers from no pretensions and makes no claims of historicity. Additionally, as Nicholas Bullock indicates, the Hunstanton School was one of the first buildings in Britain to show the influence of Mies van der Rohe. It was deemed the “most remarkable school of the year” when it opened for classes in 1954 by the *Architect and Building News*; due in part to the Smithsons' consummate skill in reinterpreting the standards established for architecture by Mies and Le Corbusier in a context appropriate to both schoolchildren and Britain.²³

Both the main building—consisting of classrooms, office space, cafeteria, enclosing courtyard spaces for outdoor play—and the single-volume symmetry of the gymnasium “appear to be made of glass, brick, steel and concrete, and is in fact made of glass, brick, steel and

²² Le Corbusier, trans. Frederick Etchells. *Towards a New Architecture*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1986, pp. 37.

²³ Bullock, Nicholas. *Building the Post-War World: Modern Architecture and Reconstruction in Britain*. London: Routledge, 2004, pp. 101-102.

concrete.”²⁴ The Hunstanton Secondary Modern School embodies architecture of honesty: it makes no attempt to hide the formalism of its plan, and in fact exposes it as much as possible. Similarly, no efforts are taken to disguise the water pipes or the mortar holding the brickwork together: it does not artfully try to conceal the building’s structural engineering. The Hunstanton School, sincere in its aims to provide schoolchildren with a structure that would meet their most basic needs, in some ways matches the innocence of those who would use it: it is a celebration of the rawness and honesty of materials offered as the cutting edge of technological development.

The Hunstanton School was not without structural difficulties, for all its aspirations for engineered perfection. Although the wide expanses of glass windows provided pupils and teachers with floods of light sufficient for their studies, they created a greenhouse effect and made the building too hot in the summer, while the opposite effect occurred in the winter. To save on energy costs and to counteract these design flaws, black panels have been applied to some of the glass’s exterior. In so doing, the Hunstanton School (now called Smithdon High School) has been recognized and sensitively restored. **(Figure 2.7)** Re-evaluating the building in 1997, Dan Cruickshank writes

Coming upon it, lying low on the edge of Hunstanton, is a thrilling experience. The Smithsons’ school is an extraordinary creation with a powerful architectural presence...it is pioneering British architecture, a status recognized by its grade II listing...[it is] a poetic essay in space and form.²⁵

A testament to the youthful zeal with which Alison and Peter Smithson explored the possibilities of their philosophical vision, the Hunstanton School nevertheless functions most convincingly as the solution to the problems encountered by young architects trying to a banner of design under which to work. Although flaws in the design required the aforementioned renovations, the efforts of the Smithsons as evidenced by the Hunstanton School gestures to the

²⁴ Banham, Reyner. “The New Brutalism.” *Architectural Review* (London), December 1955, pp. 362.

²⁵ Cruickshank, Dan. “Masterclass: Hunstanton School, Norfolk 1954.” *RIBA Journal* (London), January 1997, pp. 51.

subsequent Brutalist buildings that they and other architects would construct in its wake as both alternatives to cautious modernism and townscape picturesque, as well as definitive examples of new directions in British architecture and planning.

Not all Brutalist buildings were created equally, and not all received the esteem and sensitive ease that Hunstanton did. As Sutherland Lyall remarks,

Brutalism in one watered-down way or another had [eventually] become the *lingua franca* of the architectural establishment and had achieved acceptance as the way of designing public buildings...but too many of [the Brutalists] grossly over-reached themselves in terms of technical understanding, realizing only shoddy imitations of revered architectural and planning theories and in mistakenly transforming a sincere personal commitment to the creation of a better physical environment into a belief that they were thereby fully fledged social engineers, prime instruments of significant and progressive social change.²⁶

The mistakes that the Smithsons made in the design of the Hunstanton School forecast the problems that ensued in Brutalist buildings throughout the remainder of the 1950s, and continuing into the 1960s and 1970s. Less talented architects adopted the banner of Brutalism— attractive both for the honesty of its design, its social conscience and its extreme economy and efficiency. While the New Brutalism may have succeeded in carving space for itself within the cultural and architectural landscape of Britain and excited the imaginations of the Smithsons' followers, the best of its examples inspired poor imitations—misconceived and ill-executed designs that attempted to achieve the same level of innovation Hunstanton did. Misappropriating concepts of community living and misunderstanding planning theory for new towns, housing estates and community centers, many buildings that tried to fall under the Brutalist rubric did so poorly: without considering the nature of the building at stake or the application of materials. It hardly comes as a surprise, then, that bad Brutalist buildings are little loved today.

²⁶ Lyall, Sutherland. *The State of British Architecture*. London: The Architectural Press, 1980, pp. 41.

Images



Figure 2.1: “Parallel of Life and Art” exhibit, Institute of Contemporary Art, London, September 1953.

This installation of artworks by Eduardo Paolozzi, the Smithsons and the other artists who would eventually come to form the “Independent Group” illustrates the importance of materials “as found” in art. As Denise Scott Brown would remark, “The New Brutalists found value and delight in places and things other architects considered ugly, and they agreed that beauty could emerge from designing and building in a straightforward way, for community life as it is and not for some sentimentalized version of how it should be.”²⁷ (Photograph by Nigel Henderson, 1953)

²⁷ Scott Brown, Denise. “Learning from Brutalism.” *The Independent Group: Postwar Britain and the Aesthetics of Plenty*, ed. David Robbins. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990, pp. 205.



Figure 2.2: Alison and Peter Smithson. *Golden Lane*, 1952. Collage: photographs, magazine cutouts, and pen on paper.

This piece appeared in the “Parallel of Life and Art” exhibit. In a move that would anticipate the beginnings of Pop Art, the Smithsons looked to the influence of popular culture for their art and architecture.



Figure 2.3 : Le Corbusier, Unité d'Habitation, Marseilles, France, 1946-1952
(Photograph courtesy of <www.greatbuildings.com>)



Figure 2.4: Hunstanton Secondary Modern School, view over west playground to school (left) and gymnasium (right.) *(Photograph by Nigel Henderson, copyright 1954.)*

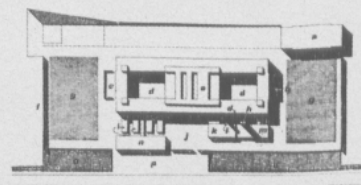


Figure 2.5: Interior views of gymnasium, Hunstanton School.

The Smithsons specifically requested that the photographs of Hunstanton be taken with no furniture or interior fixtures in place, so that the linear forms of their design would be undisturbed. (*Photographs by Nigel Henderson, copyright 1954.*)

SITE.—The site, which is of 22 acres and rectangular in shape, lies just outside the town of Hunstanton, which is a seaside resort built mainly in early Victorian times. To the west is the main Hunstanton-Kings Lynn road and there is a secondary road on the north boundary. Although there are no existing trees on the site itself, it is surrounded by hedges and a few small trees. The ground slopes

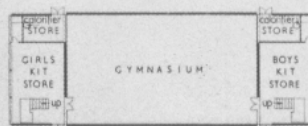
Key
a, gymnasium and changing rooms.
b, caretaker's garden.
c, school garden.
d, green court.
e, main block.
f, 7 ft. high wall.
g, pitch.
h, water tower.
i, cycle sheds.
j, forecourt.
k, kitchen.
l, chimney.
m, adult housecraft.
n, workshops.
o, hs-ha revment.
p, car park.



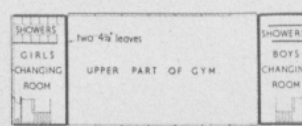
Site plan

SECONDARY SCHOOL

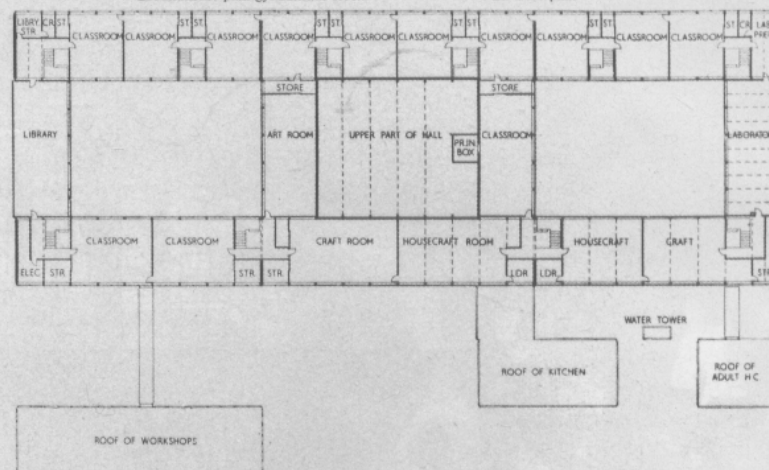
at HUNSTANTON, NORFOLK
designed by ALISON
and PETER SMITHSON



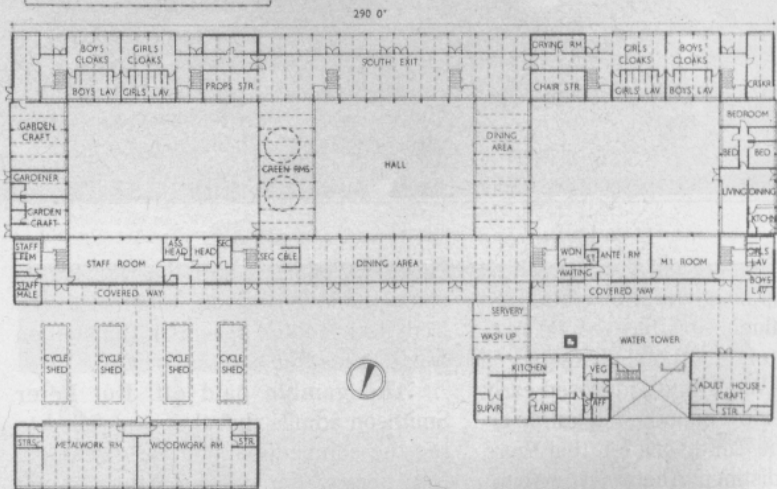
Ground floor plan gymnasium block



First floor plan



First floor plan



Ground floor plan of main block. The boilerhouse is below the kitchen. The caretaker's flat is in the centre of the west block.
[Scale: 1/4" = 1' 0"]

REPRINTED FROM *AF*

Figure 2.6: Hunstanton Secondary Modern School plan, 1954.
(Reprinted in the *RIBA Journal*, January 1997)



Figure 2.7: Children at play in the school gymnasium, 1997
(*Photograph by Dan Cruickshank, copyright 1997*)

“The Skyscraper Condemnation Affiliate²⁸”: The Trellick Tower,
the Prince, Poundbury and Popular Culture

In his 1975 novel of dystopia, British writer J.G. Ballard looked to the city of London to inspire his vision of commercialism run amok. Considering its skyline, Ballard found the perfect metaphor for a society that could be primitive and technocratic all at once—that represented the feelings of alienation and malaise that characterized this period of late capitalism, wherein consumption replaced the great corporate narratives of morality that had defined western civilization up until the Second World War. In the architectural model of the high rise apartment building, that Modernist testament to technological reason and utopian living, Ballard found his muse. In Ernő Goldfinger’s Trellick Tower (1968-1972), he found his model, the building afflicted by the social ills it aimed to solve and demonized by the press, would be the perfect setting for a novel about the decline of civilization. For Ballard, the high-rise apartment building

seemed almost to challenge the sun itself...the architects who designed it could not have foreseen the drama of confrontation each morning between the concrete slabs and the rising sun...by its very efficiency, the high-rise took over the task of maintaining the social structure that supported them all...Secure within the shell of the high-rise like passengers on board an automatically piloted airliner, they [the residents] were free to behave in any way they wished, explore the darkest corners they could find. In many ways, the high-rise was a model of all that technology had done to make possible the expression of a truly ‘free’ psychopathology.²⁹

Ernő Goldfinger—Hungarian immigrant, student of Auguste Perret and Le Corbusier, uncompromising visionary, and by all accounts an “angry architect,”³⁰ constructed the building that would come to represent for Ballard and others the environment that encouraged the devolution of human behavior; for the buildings’ earliest residents and members of the press, it

²⁸ The name of this chapter comes from the Kinks song “The Village Green Preservation Society,” which satirizes typical bourgeois British tastes during for draught beer, custard pies and variety shows. The lyric continues: “We are the skyscraper condemnation affiliate/God save Tudor houses, antique tables and billiards.” Copyright Ray Davies, 1965.

²⁹ Ballard, J.G. *High-Rise*. London: Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1975, pp. 36.

³⁰ Darley, Gillian. “Don’t Teach Me” (review of Nigel Warburton’s *Ernő Goldfinger: The Life of an Architect*.) *London Review of Books*, April 1, 2004.

merely came to be known as one of the ugliest buildings in all of Britain. However, by examining the history of the Trellick Tower and exploring the specifics of its plan and aesthetics, its more significant place in the history of British architecture can be established. The Trellick Tower—commanding equally vocal critics and defenders, depending on the decade—is a case study in the fickleness of fashion.

For all of the problems engendered by the construction of the Trellick Tower, its descent into disarray and condemnation by both the architectural elite and the public was matched, in later years, by a newfound appreciation for its forms and functions, and a concerted effort to repair it that resulted in its listing as an historic landmark by the government organization English Heritage. Flats in the 31-story building changed hands from residents eagerly seeking exodus from the “Tower of Terror” (and having to wait up to two years before the public housing councils could find other accommodation for them) in its earliest years, to new tenants willing to spend upwards of £150,000 (approximately \$262,000) for a two-bedroom unit. The Trellick Tower’s history entails a study of the rise and fall of trends in architectural fashions, both among the elite, who are responsible for the construction of new buildings and the creation of new styles, and the general public. The case of the Trellick Tower provides a vivid contrast to the modes of public housing and public life invented in the 1980’s and 1990’s. The Trellick Tower is a poignant antithesis of Poundbury—two visions of British utopian living that were manufactured by the sheer will of their architects and theorists. Both projects have become crucial parts of both British architectural history and architectural heritage.

A prolific writer and theorist, Ernő Goldfinger above all emphasized the importance of a building’s spatial experience. In language that would echo the Vitruvian advocacy of *firmitas*,

utilitas and *venustas*³¹, Goldfinger argued that there were three primary components of architecture: “functional needs (why it was made), constructional means (the available technological resources), [and] emotional effect (how it is experienced.)”³² The experience of architecture as a physical and psychological experience came to mean much more for Goldfinger than the mere application of a specific aesthetic. The Trellick Tower, though uncompromising in its use of poured concrete (Goldfinger dismissed the use of precast concrete units as lazy and cheap) and in the severity of its narrow silhouette, was Goldfinger’s most sincere attempt to accommodate the needs of its residents. In his article “The Sensations of Space” for the *Architectural Review*, Goldfinger recalled in words not unlike a lyric poet’s the crucial importance the role of human experience plays in defining architecture; without it, building would not be considered “Architecture” at all. He writes

The spatial order is built up by an amalgamation of a multitude of phenomena, the perception of which, subconsciously integrated, helps in building up the sensations of space. Memories and experience, not only of visual sensation but also of sound and touch with smell, enter into it. The sound and vibration in a hall; the physical touch of the walls of a narrow passage; the atmosphere and temperature of a stuffy room; the smell of a damp cellar; all are, in various degrees, components of spatial sensation. Every element, plastic or pictorial, partially obstructing the view, and the people in the crowd rubbing against you, are part of it.³³

Goldfinger felt his architecture of massed volumes offered the best possible experience of physical space. Although his creations have been described as possessing a “terrible beauty” even by his most ardent champions, Goldfinger’s Trellick Tower and the debate it inspired about the appropriateness of high-rise housing, Brutalist architecture and the way men and women

³¹ Vitruvius, trans. Morris Hicky Morgan. *The Ten Books on Architecture*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1960, book I, III.iv. Vitruvius defines the main principles of architecture as *firmitas*, meaning “[durability] will be assured when foundations are carried down to the solid ground and materials wisely and liberally selected,” *utilitas*, or “when the arrangement of the apartments is faultless and presents no hindrance to use, and when each class of building is assigned to its suitable and appropriate exposure,” and *venustas*, or “when the appearance of the work is pleasing and in good taste, and when its members are in due proportion according to correct principles of symmetry.” Goldfinger’s three categories not only echo these sentiments, but are also reminiscent of the Smithsons’ own professed usage of formal geometry of the classical orders, as well as the aphorisms of Perret and Le Corbusier.

³² Warburton, Nigel. *Ernö Goldfinger: The Life of an Architect*. London: Routledge, 2004, pp. 114.

³³ Goldfinger, Ernő. “The Sensation of Space,” reprinted in J. Dunnett and S. Stamp, *Ernö Goldfinger*. London: Architectural Association Press, 1983, pp. 48-49

should live testify to its rightful position within the canon of twentieth-century British architecture.

A committed Marxist all throughout his life—and one who saw the ideals of the generation with whom he trained destroyed by the Second World War—Goldfinger attempted to alleviate the problems caused by the British housing shortage in the years after the war in a manner consonant with his socialist-utopian instincts. The population boom, coupled with the destruction of much of London, demanded a quick solution to the housing shortage; it was matched by the Labour government's vested interest in a social policy that met the needs of individuals from all socio-economic classes. High rise housing developments, introduced to the British landscape as an alternative to often unsanitary and Victorian terraced houses, seemed to solve many different social problems at once. Like Le Corbusier's *Ville Radieuse*, or "City in the Sky," high-rise housing projects could house many people at a low cost per person, and occupy as little land as possible. Le Corbusier and others imagined that these cities in the sky would free available land for parks and other public places. As Goldfinger remarked, "...the whole object of building high is to free the ground for children and grown-ups to enjoy Mother Earth and not cover every inch with brick and mortar."³⁴

As an extra incentive to the creation of high-rise tower blocks was the 1956 Housing Subsidies Act, which provided increased government funding to all buildings over five stories high in order to encourage the development of these new communities. In London, where over 450,000 homes were destroyed in the war, the vision of people from all different classes, living together in a communal environment towering above the city and provided with all modern conveniences, high-rise housing plans seemed like a blessing. The high-rises would recast the city skyline in sleek, modern tones, and foster civic pride amongst residents who could school

³⁴ Ernő Goldfinger, letter to the *Guardian* (London), February 2, 1968.

their children, do all of their shopping and housework and participate in leisure activities at one convenient location. They would be properly heated and ventilated, and create ample space below not only for parks, but for parking and cars as well. The high-rise apartment building, in the eyes of those who believed in architecture's capacity to solve social ills, could act as panacea for all of the problems created in the wake of the war. Seemingly taking architect Berthold Lubetkin's famous words that "nothing is too good for ordinary people"³⁵ in mind, the Labour government promised to continue striving towards a better Britain for the middle and working classes. These ideals continued to characterize the political climate of Britain well after the initial push for redevelopment in the 1940s and early 1950s. The Labour party's general election manifesto of 1966 proclaimed, "In the next five years we shall go further. We have announced—and we intend to achieve—a target of 500,000 houses [to be built] by 1969/1970. After that we shall go on to higher levels still. It must be done—for bad and inadequate housing is the greatest social evil in Britain today."³⁶

Young architects, flush with the sense of optimism engendered by the socialist political climate and eager to learn the lessons wrought by the experiments of the Smithsons in the preceding years—confronting a swinging Britain that stood at the forefront of a pop culture revolution, attacked the housing shortage problem with brio. Unfortunately, many efforts during the postwar period of heady optimism leading up through the 1960s were poorly constructed, and in the most spectacular cases, failed miserably. While the use of concrete easily achieved the rough, brutalist exterior so favored members of the architectural avant-garde in their housing experiments like the LCC's Alton West Housing Estate in Roehampton, London (1959) (**Figure 3.1**), the use of prefabricated concrete sections, or "system-built" according to a set of

³⁵ Berthold Lubetkin, quoted in Fowler, Rebecca. "Too Many Admirers?" *The Independent* (London), August 2, 1996.

³⁶ 1966 Labour Party Manifesto <www.labour-party.org.uk>

instructions, became common by the late 1960s and often negated the sense of innovation so carefully cultivated by the Smithsons in their designs. The use of these pre-fabricated units in tower block construction meant that the architect's original design was barely visible after construction. Additionally, political involvement with architecture, in the form of the London County Council and the subsequent Greater London Council, sometimes eviscerated construction budgets in the name economy.

Jane Jacobs's seminal book on public housing and urban planning *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1960) examines the inherent in precisely planned public housing and public spaces. She addresses the misconceptions of city planners and architects who wished to build cities above cities; she attacks their dismissal of "extraneous people;" those who do not fit into the envisioned socio-economic schema, and then dreams that fail to take into account the peculiar dependence of urban life on contact on the street and sidewalk. Their plans offer nothing but isolation and loneliness to men and women who find must all of their needs met in one narrow building. She writes

To house people in this planned fashion, price tags are fastened on the population, and each sorted-out chunk of price-tagged populace lives in growing suspicion and tension against the surrounding city. When two or more such hostile islands are juxtaposed the result is called "a balanced neighborhood." Monopolistic shopping centers and monumental cultural centers cloak, under the public relations hoohaw, the subtraction of commerce, and of culture too, from the intimate and casual life of cities.³⁷

Crucial to the well-being of the city, she maintained, was the well-monitored use of sidewalks and streets, and the importance of an organically evolved site for public gathering. Jacobs dismissed the effectiveness of specifically designated areas for commerce, work, and play; she held that mixed use of space was really the only way to encourage socioeconomic diversity in neighborhoods and avoid the vacuums that allowed slums to arise. Despite the widely recognized validity of Jacobs's claims—as well as her language, which eerily anticipates the

³⁷ Jacobs, Jane. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. New York: Vintage Books, 1992, pp. 4

prose of J.G. Ballard in describing the high-rise experiment—British architects and planners continued to construct high-rise housing well after the book’s publication. Ernő Goldfinger was no exception: he believed sincerely that high-rise housing was the most attractive option for city-dwellers wishing to rid themselves of the squalor of the slums.

After the success of Goldfinger’s Balfron Tower in the East End of London, a two-phase development for the Greater London Council completed in 1968—by which time he had forged a reputation as an architect of prodigious talent throughout the course of a long career—Goldfinger embarked upon what would ultimately become his most ambitious and most hotly contested project. The Trellick Tower is Balfron’s sister, located in North Kensington, and follows it the same plan with a few alterations—the addition of four additional stories bringing the grand total to thirty-one being one area of difference. The building is unapologetic in its design aim: like Louis Sullivan’s skyscrapers of an earlier generation, the function of this high-rise was to “look tall,” and indeed, it does. Upon its completion in April 1972, it was the tallest residential building in Europe. The building’s narrow silhouette (**Figure 3.2**) and the pattern of narrow window slits, alternating in pattern along the building’s façade enhance the overall impression of the building’s height, as well as the separate “services tower” joined to the main building by narrow walkways on every third floor. The boiler room projects outward, in Nigel Warburton’s words, “like some kind of observation post.”³⁸ The corridors leading to the walkways thus became “streets,” encouraging the passage of human traffic.

In addition to being taller than the Balfron project, Goldfinger took into consideration the complaints of the 160 families inhabiting the East End building when finalizing the plans for the Trellick Tower. As much natural light as possible diffuses through the apartments’ windows, and the heating system is improved. Built-in cupboards and windows swivel in toward each

³⁸ Warburton, pp. 164.

room which allow for easy cleaning when opened. Cedar-clad balconies offer residents an ideal place from which to enjoy the fantastic views of London. Drying rooms eliminated the problem of unsightly washing lines hung from balconies, while color-coded wall tiles for each floor let tenants know where they are. Stained glass and marble in the building lobby provided a welcoming entranceway. Seemingly, Goldfinger had thought of everything to optimize residents' comfort. Original resident Lee Boland, now president of the buildings' Tenants' Association, remarked "...[Once inside] the building began to cast its spell. The interior was in pristine condition. The marble-clad entrance lobby. The stained glass wall. My flat—truly remarkable, the views breathtaking. No contest. We moved in."³⁹ So successful was the design at first that Goldfinger moved his own office to the Trellick Tower, enabling him to interact with the building's residents on a daily basis. It seemed, at first, that the Trellick Tower offered an elegant option for public housing. **(Figure 3.3)**

Ironically, the Trellick Tower's death knell sounded even before its completion. Despite the continued construction of high-rise tower blocks, the tide would soon turn against them in the eyes of the international public. On May 16, 1968, a resident in the Ronan Point tower block in the Canning Town section of London boiled water for tea early in the morning, and caused a major gas explosion that destroyed a significant portion of the twenty-three story building. Five people died, and millions of pounds of damage were incurred. Although Ronan Point had been built from prefabricated concrete units fitted together **(Figure 3.4)**, the press quickly labeled the explosion a "disaster," and new concerns were raised about the safety of high-rise living. The Ronan Point fiasco also lent credence to another idea that gained currency in the 1970's: architects were either entirely to blame for the flaws in their building designs, or they had

³⁹ Lee and Columb Boland, "Ernö Goldfinger's Trellick Tower and Its Environs," 1999, unpublished manuscript, introduction. Reprinted in Nigel Warburton, pp. 166.

nothing to do with the construction of buildings at all. The critic Conrad Jamieson argued that “popular housing is not really the architect’s proper business or concern...even up to the last War, most architects would have asked why ordinary house forms should be designed afresh when, with minor modifications, designs copied from traditional pattern books would do better or at least as well.”⁴⁰ This view not only signals the growing contempt amongst members of the architectural elite for those architects who were truly invested in implementing a social program through design, but it also belies the classist attitude that many professionals in Britain held at the onset of the Thatcher era, and continue to hold.

Four years later, another “disaster” would mar the reputation of high-rise tower blocks as low-cost housing, but this time in America. In 1972, Minoru Yamasaki’s Pruitt Igoe housing project in St. Louis was demolished, labeled a failure by officials because it did not relieve the slums of St. Louis from the problems of urban blight—to the contrary, it became a slum. Critic Charles Jencks has pointed to this moment as “the death of modern architecture” in *The Language of Postmodern Architecture*, and it raised awareness throughout the architectural community about the perils and problems implicit within the construction and maintenance of high-rise tower blocks. For the residents of the Trellick Tower, however, the destruction of the Pruitt Igoe buildings would remain a symbolic death—their own homes began to descend into a personal hell that would not be demolished. Critic Roger Scruton, a British opponent of the tower-block system wrote about

...the desolation that is felt at the realization of the maddest of all utopian schemes, the open-planned housing complex, where streets are replaced by empty spaces from which towers arise, towers bearing neither the mark of communal order, nor any visible record of the individual house, and demonstrating in their every aspect the triumph of that collective individualism from which both community and individual are abolished.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Jamieson, Conrad. “Modern Architecture as an Ideology,” *Architectural Association Quarterly*, vol. 7, no. 4, pp. 15-21.

⁴¹ Scruton, Roger. *Utopia on Trial: Vision and Reality in Planned Housing*, revised edition. London: Hilary Shipman, 1979, pp. 250

These criticisms became common as the reputation of buildings like the Trellick Tower declined due to the problems associated with urban living that Goldfinger and others so sincerely endeavored to relieve through their designs.

Despite Goldfinger's wish for a security system to be installed throughout the building, and for a concierge to limit access, the Greater London Council refused to consider this. Rory Carroll writes

[Trellick Tower] was the first victim of 1970's radical socialist utopianism. The Greater London Council...axed the plan to have a concierge in the lobby despite residents' pleas. Such snoopers were vessels of fascism and had no place in the new London. So Trellick was denied security and became a magnet for north London vagrants. Crime soared. Tenants with pull fled, those without watched as the council dumped problem families, drug addicts and the mentally ill next door.⁴²

Stories of horrors within the Trellick Tower became more and more lurid as time went on.

During the Christmas holidays in 1972, delinquents from the neighborhood opened a fire hydrant on the twelfth-floor landing, causing thousands of gallons of water to flood the elevator shafts, causing a power failure that left tenants without basic amenities like running water, electricity and heat for the duration of the holiday period. The three elevators rarely functioned properly after this event, often making residents prisoners in their own homes—unable to carry groceries up multiple stories; afraid to use their cars stationed in the parking lots crawling with unsavory characters. Reports proliferated of burglaries and rapes occurring in the corridors and service areas of the building. Goldfinger's specially-devised heating system, intended to make residents more comfortable as they went through different areas of the building, actually attracted homeless people to camp out in corridors. Granted unlimited access to the building interior, the heated corridors and service areas provided local drug dealers with safe, dry places to conduct their business. In 1982, a skydiver named Francis Donellan tried to jump from the top of the

⁴² Carroll, Rory. "How did this become the Height of Fashion?" *Guardian*, March 11 1999.

building as a kind of publicity stunt, but died when his parachute failed to open.⁴³ Graffiti and broken glass came to characterize the building's exterior, already an aggressive visual component of the landscape on account of the character of its poured concrete façade. The Trellick Tower seemed cursed, and seemed to signify the death of the New Brutalism.

These problems, however severe, were not the only ones to afflict Trellick Tower. In 1973, the United Kingdom suffered an economic recession that ended the post-war boom. As unemployment and inflation increased, so too did contempt for the welfare state and the socialist policies of the Labour government. By the time Margaret Thatcher and the Conservative party came to lead Parliament in 1975, dissatisfaction with public housing policy was great. In the modernist housing projects—that were conceived in moments of optimism about a great communal society for a universal man—the worst problems associated with cities flowered, while dreams of quality for the working man seemed to wither. The Conservative party's Right to Buy policy, which became the Housing Act of 1980, allowed people to buy residences from their local councils at a discounted rate. Those who could afford to move out of the Trellick Tower did so, buying residential units elsewhere: those who could not were stuck. Economic diversity within the residents of the buildings decreased, and the poorest of the poor moved in, thus further altering the character of the building and Goldfinger's original vision of community life.

Backlash against high-rise apartment buildings continued through the 1970s and well into the 1990s. Was Prince Charles not so entirely out of line when decrying the buildings of contemporary London as “carbuncles on the face of Britain?” If he considered the Trellick Tower and its counterparts not for their architectural merit and intentions, but for the sorry state of affairs they were allowed to fall into by the local and national government, perhaps his anti-

⁴³ Ibid.

modernism could be more intellectually justifiable. Assuming the role of anti-modernist in the mid-1980's, Prince Charles positioned himself as a maverick critic, uniquely appointed to speak as a representative of “the common man” (however laughable this may seem) about what was wrong with the British landscape. His angry speeches to the Corporation of London's Planning and Communication Committee in 1987 betray his opinions to Modernism (he called Le Corbusier “notorious”⁴⁴), and reflected a rather disturbing current of contemporary taste. Prince Charles, as a prophet of the people and possessing a surprising amount of influence in both elite and populist realms, used his reputation as means of venting his gripes with Modernism, particularly in London. In so doing, he effectively re-opened debate about the nature of Modernist buildings—their intentions and their ultimate effects—and actually helped the cause of Modernism by galvanizing its defenders. Rather than representing the will of the people against the will of the architectural elite, he did exactly what he accused the Modernists and Brutalists of doing—telling people what they *should* want.

Comparing the wartime damage visited upon the United Kingdom by the Germans to the buildings that were built in the war's aftermath, Prince Charles remarked, “[The architects] didn't replace them with anything more offensive than rubble[...] planning turned out to be the continuation of the war by other means.”⁴⁵ As he continued this train of thought in his series for the BBC entitled *A Vision of Britain* and in a monograph of the same name, it became apparent that for Prince Charles and others of his persuasion—and those whose views he claimed to represent, as the voice of the people—the loss of the City of London's pre-modern skyline was worth the most regret. Dominated by the uncompromising profiles of the Trellick Tower and

⁴⁴ HRH the Prince of Wales. *A Vision of Britain: A Personal View of Architecture*. London: Doubleday, 1989, pp. 39.

⁴⁵ HRH the Prince of Wales, 1987. Reprinted in Williams, Richard J. *The Anxious City: English Urbanism in the Late Twentieth Century*. London: Routledge, 2004, pp. 43.

other buildings of its ilk, the skyline offered Prince Charles the most ammunition for his argument that city-planning and architecture should return to the methods used in the pre-Industrial age. He wrote, “This [the high-rise] was a symbol of the whole sad legacy of 60’s housing—an up-to-date dinosaur that was born extinct. A colossal fossil. It was never alive, but it hangs on like grim death.”⁴⁶

Prince Charles was not content to voice his complaints without taking action, however. In 1988, he embarked on a project of property development with the American architect Andres Duany, fresh from the success of his small-town, main-street American development of Seaside, Florida, and Léon Krier, a well-known historicist designer. Together they conceived of the plan for a town, Poundbury, to be constructed on land owned in Dorset by the Duchy of Cornwall. Poundbury would present an alternative to the modern city and its codes of planning and zoning; it was to be constructed entirely according to the building codes and aesthetics of the year 1823. Obviously the apogee of architectural cultivation and societal perfection for the Prince, Poundbury’s nineteenth-century trappings would bring the environment down to a more human scale—streets would be narrow, houses uniform and in the style of an agrarian village, and life would be romantic. The construction of Poundbury makes Richard Rogers’s 1984 remarks on the subject of Modernist-bashing eerily prophetic: “Modern architecture is in danger of being obliterated by an indiscriminate wave of nostalgia...A better understanding of history is essential, but uninformed criticism and the romanticizing of the past are not the ways to build a better environment today.”⁴⁷ With Poundbury, Prince Charles and Krier re-invented and re-interpreted the townscape picturesque that proliferated in Britain after the war, even as they attempted to bring Britain back to the nineteenth-century.

⁴⁶ HRH Prince Charles, *A Vision of Britain*, pp. 41.

⁴⁷ Richard Rogers, letter to *The Times* (London), June 9, 1984. Quoted in Jencks, Charles. *The Prince, The Architects and New-Wave Monarchy*. London: Rizzoli International, 1988, pp. 18-19.

In addition to hearkening back to an agrarian village not out of place in Merrye Olde England, Poundbury deals with the conditions of contemporary living with disdain and contempt, in the best cases, and with anxiety and fear in the worst cases. **(Figures 3.5-3.6)** Rather than accommodating the automobile and making car parks heroic, Krier hid parking spaces at the rears of buildings. Buildings would be no more than three or four stories high, set close to the streets, and the town center would be demarcated by a church, civic building and marketplace. Although this sounds charming, life in Poundbury is governed by strict ethic and aesthetic codes, much more so than life in the Trellick Tower was, and more than the Smithsons and Reyner Banham could ever formulate. If the use of a closed-circuit security system and concierge in the Trellick Tower was deemed too fascistic by the Greater London Council, then the whole town of Poundbury does its best to overcompensate. Krier and Duany decreed:

The following items shall *not* be located such that they will be visible from the streets: clothes driers, meter-boxes, air extractors, wall-ventilation openings, dustbins or roof-top solar collectors or soil-pipes. Where airbricks are essential to satisfy building regulations, these shall be of terracotta, painted cast iron, or unpainted drilled stone. Vent stacks clearly visible from the streets shall be enclosed within chimneys or lead-clad. The following items are specifically forbidden: bubble skylights, prefabricated accessory buildings, permanent plastic sub-blinds/awnings, plastic commercial fascias and lettering and illuminated signs [...] external individual television aerials and collectors are not permitted.⁴⁸

How these prescriptions for living—the rejection of modern amenities for making housework and commuting easier, etc.—heed Prince Charles’s call to refrain from telling the people what they *should* want remains a mystery. As Richard Williams says, these codes for living verge on authoritarian.

Surely, however, these are not the only two alternatives for living in contemporary Britain: in the shell of a once-great Modernist vision, or in a historical past that has been manufactured by a post-Modernism that turns a blind eye to the advances made in building and planning during the twentieth century and considers the early nineteenth century to have been the

⁴⁸ Krier, Léon. *Architecture and Urban Design, 1967-2002*. London: Academy Editions, 1992, pp. 264-5.

pinnacle of civilization. Steps taken during the 1980s and 1990s to restore Trellick to Goldfinger's original vision have done much to improve its reputation as an architectural landmark in London. Although the installation of a security system and the hiring of a concierge did not occur until 1994, the formation of a tenants' association in the mid-1980s gave voice the concerns of residents to the local council, and led to the refurbishment of Trellick's graffiti-scarred façade and temperamental elevators. It was decided in 1986 that only residents who actually wanted to live in Trellick could live there, thus doing much to improve the morale of tenants. The gentrification of North Kensington has also helped the building's reputation immensely: its profile graces t-shirts and is mentioned in pop songs. The Trellick Tower has fought its way out of the abyss that claimed Pruitt-Igoe: it has survived the horrors of urban blight through the action of its residents, who were not content to see their homes fall into dereliction, and it has asserted itself as proof of Modernism's highest aims. Although by the time of his death in 1987, Goldfinger would not see his own reputation rescued, the Trellick Tower is evidence that high-rise apartment buildings can indeed survive—despite the decried concrete, despite being condemned as a “carbuncle.” The moral agenda envisioned by Goldfinger and others—community living for all—remains a noble one, although its inherent naiveté has been exposed. Poundbury has proved a bland exercise in elitist taste-making—precisely the thing Prince Charles claimed to avoid.

However, does the contemporary success of the Trellick Tower really speak to the success of the Modern movement? Or has its ethos merely been co-opted by postmodernism as an historical reminder of what once was, now to be quoted from and applied as pastiche to any new building? Does the Modernism of Ernő Goldfinger have a place in the history of English architecture, inspired as it was by continental examples, and does it have a place in the English

heritage? Borne out of a sincere concern for the conditions of living for the working man, but undermined by the government, the Trellick Tower's survival does speak to the relevance of the ideals it embodied—if not the physical realities of living there. Unlike Poundbury, which relies on a nostalgic vision of a Britain that never really existed—at least, not for anyone who might have lived in an agrarian village, and certainly not for Prince Charles—the Trellick Tower was forged out of honesty and hope for better living, however misguided some of its counterparts, like Ronan Point, may have been. As Nigel Whiteley writes,

We need to conserve them [Modernist buildings] in order to maintain them as historical documents. We should save Modern architecture, not necessarily because we are fond of it or even because we especially value it as relevant to the needs of today, but because it is an authentic and important record of historical values and practices. Those values may be currently unfashionable, but we have a duty to conserve important monuments...for future appreciation and reinterpretation.⁴⁹

The genuine conviction of the values Ernő Goldfinger attempted to imbue in his building still rings true today, even if we have evolved past his dream of a socialist-utopia. Although the Trellick Tower will always have detractors and those who would malign it for not matching the vision of Britain articulated by Prince Charles and Léon Krier, it is now safe for posterity. Crystallized as a chapter in the history of British architecture, it was granted “listed” status in 1998 by English Heritage and cannot be demolished.

⁴⁹ Whiteley, Nigel. “Modern Architecture, Heritage and Englishness.” *Architectural History*, Vol. 38 (1995), 221.

Images



Figure 3.1: London County Council's Architects' Department, Alton West Estate, Roehampton, London, 1952-1955. These public housing estates reflect the influence of Le Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation, and also gesture to the taller tower-blocks that would begin to dot the British landscape during the 1960s. *(Photograph courtesy of <www.greatbuildings.com>)*

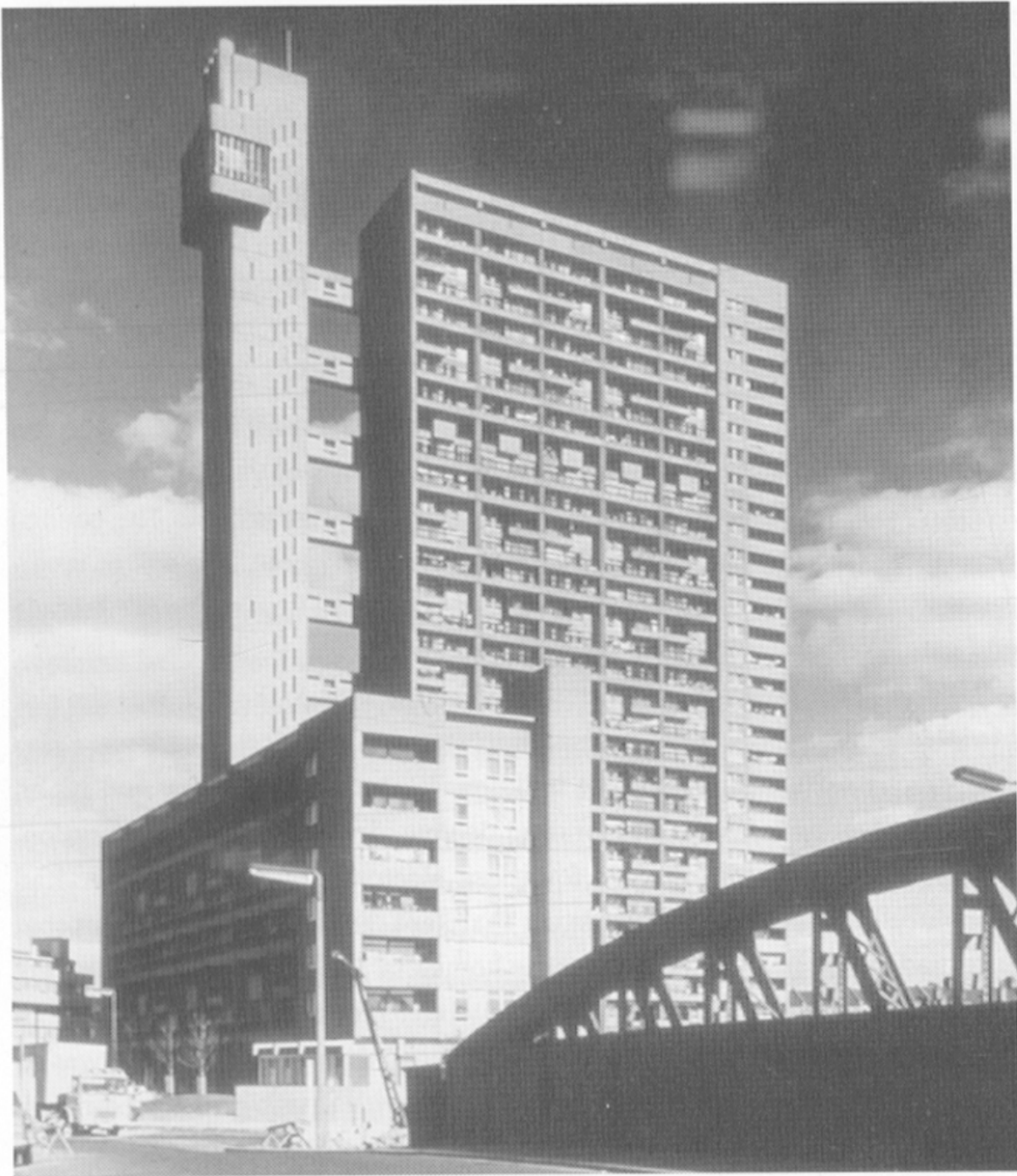


Figure 3.2: Trellick Tower, 1968-1972. View of front façade with service tower. (*Photograph by Ernő Goldfinger, copyright 1972.*)



Figure 3.3: Trellick Tower, plans for apartment prototypes



Figure 3.4: Ronan Point after explosion, 1968. (*Photograph by Ernő Goldfinger*) The precast concrete units were destroyed by a minor gas explosion caused by a woman making a cup of tea.



Figures 3.5-3.6: Poundbury, Dorset, 2003. *(Photographs by Richard Williams, copyright 2003)*
The reincarnation of the “village green” falls flat in this city of pseudo memories.

Language, not Labels: Denys Lasdun's Modern Architecture

One of the most controversial buildings to receive the appellation of “brutalist” was built, ironically, by an architect who strove to distance himself from all architectural movements. The National Theatre (1968-1976), built as part of the regeneration of the South Bank area on the Thames in London, was the work of a visionary architect who sought to find space for himself create a synthesis of the architecture that influenced him within the continuum of “architectural history.” Denys Lasdun, born in 1914 and active as a practicing architect through the giddy period of High Modernism in the 1930’s, the post-war years and the years of postmodernism and revivalism in the 1960’s and 1970’s, endeavored only to suit his own particular vision of how architecture—by nature, public—should complement the urban landscape. His National Theatre building embodies principles of his design convictions with power and with grace, but unfortunately has fallen victim to the vagaries of fashion. Despite the ingenuity of the design: stacked cantilevered floors and passages that rendered all parts of the building visible at once; its organic growth from the Waterloo Bridge, visitors and passersby functioning as moving ornament throughout the lengths of corridors and stairs—the National Theatre’s “Modern” design has been vilified by many as an architecture lacking traditional gravitas needed to meet the lofty heights of Britain’s storied theatrical past. Additionally, its close proximity to the Hayward Gallery (1968), an earlier Brutalist building roundly denounced a failure, and the products of architects working under the supervision of the Greater London Council, has stained the National Theatre’s reputation by association. Although Lasdun intended the Theatre to be read as a natural part of the urban landscape, in close dialogue with the natural topography of its location and the buildings around it, it suffers from its location next to poor architecture.

The Hayward Gallery can be called a “Brutalist” building with little reservation—it is a building that exemplifies the “watered down lingua franca” of the 1960’s that Sutherland Lyall warned against. Although the GLC was under the direction of Sir Hubert Bennett at the time of their creation, the Hayward maintains an anonymity of design that disadvantageously affects a visitor’s experience of it, as well as the entire South Bank Arts Centre complex, which was officially created in 1985 to incorporate the loosely connected buildings on the site. An editorial in the respected *Burlington Magazine* calls the exterior of the Hayward Gallery “willfully rebarbative,” and goes on to dismiss its use as an art gallery: “...the layout is inflexible, the entrance is poky, the storage and handling spaces are poor.”⁵⁰ Additionally, it was voted by 46% of 500 engineers as “Britain’s Ugliest Building.”⁵¹ Because of its poor functioning as an art gallery and exhibition space, and its aggressive exterior, the Hayward Gallery can be criticized with justification. As Charles Jencks wrote of the South Bank complex

...there is no apparent structural logic...there are at least four different structural systems; and...all seem to be unrelated...There is no underlying coherence, no visual logic which helps explain the functional logic. If anything, the appearance confuses the function. Thus what one might take as the cantilever of the auditorium turns out to be the mechanical equipment; what one regards as a casual fire escape turns out to be the main entrance from car level. In fact anyone who tries to read off each function separately is completely baffled by the confusion of shapes and ambiguities of form.⁵²

The difficulties visitors regularly report at the South Bank Arts Centre reinforce the criticism of architects as uncaring, uncompromising visionaries. Ironically, it seems that the South Bank complex, despite its supposed function as a central place for art in London, (**Figure 4.1**), suffers from the lack of a unifying vision. The harshness of these buildings’ concrete exteriors—called hangars or barracks by some—are unmediated by the kind of artistic generosity and consideration of human use demonstrated by the Smithsons, Goldfinger and Denys Lasdun.

⁵⁰ *The Burlington Magazine* (London). “Art and Architecture on the South Bank.” Vol. 134, No. 1074 (September, 1992), pp. 569.

⁵¹ *Daily Mail*, October 1967. Cited in Jencks, Charles. “Adhocism on the South Bank.” *Architectural Review* (London), July 1968, pp. 27.

⁵² *Ibid.*

Misconceived in design, the Hayward Gallery (**Figure 4.2**) fails to fulfill its stated functions as an art gallery and cultural center on the interior, and its exterior fails to be anything but rough. It has earned only the enmity of the British public as yet another reminder of the worst excesses of 1960s architecture: it is an uninspired reinterpretation of innovative designs conceived by avant-garde architects.

Even before it opened, the British architectural elite seemed apologetic for the design of the Hayward. Anticipating negative criticism, Michael Webb writes, “It would be unfair to judge the Hayward Gallery before it is extensively used. One may guess that for the more popular exhibitions, the entrances and cloakrooms will prove inadequate; even granting the need to economize on staff, it is depressing to find these features repeatedly skimped.”⁵³ Clunky and raised on columns, the space created by the parapets leading to the main gallery and below are dark and dingy, and offer no logical way to enter the building. From the tone of Webb’s review, it is clear why the Hayward Gallery would continue to apologize for itself since its completion.

For Lasdun, the National Theatre offered the opportunity to create an extension of the South Bank Arts complex that would both suit the needs of the landscape, and also create comfortable space for visitors. His architecture, like the architecture of Owen Luder, James Stirling and others at the vanguard of the New Brutalism—endeavors to add meaningful space to the built environment. Though Lasdun sought to distance himself from the labels associated with the Smithsons and the fashions of the 1950s and 1960s, his vision of beauty does not deviate widely from their visions of functional beauty in an urban context. The work of Denys Lasdun may not align chronologically or ideologically with the work of the other Brutalist architects, but he too was concerned with conceiving an architecture of sincerity that would reflect the values of an evolving Britain. Although Prince Charles deemed the National Theatre

⁵³ Webb, Michael. *Architecture in Britain Today*. Middlesex: Country Life Books, 1969, pp. 205.

“a clever way of building a nuclear power plant in the middle of London without anyone objecting”⁵⁴ in 1989, its popularity and the sensitivity with which it has been renovated attests to its success. The National Theatre is the architect’s attempt to build art that is democratic: the building belongs to the people of Britain. Lasdun tried to create a topographical and artistic synchronicity within the romantically projecting forms of the building, and paid as much attention to the spaces created in between the building’s elements as the building itself. The spectacular views of the Thames and London’s other civic monuments made possible by the National Theatre’s architecture illustrate Lasdun’s concern for architectural *Gestalt*. For him, architecture could not exist in a vacuum of concrete, steel, and scaffolding. Instead, the architecture of the National Theatre becomes an integral, integrated part of the natural and man-made landscape: it serves the purposes of human drama and encapsulates the emotion implicit within its bounds by appealing to our desires to imbibe the power and beauty of our surroundings. It is a building that exemplifies the ethos of the New Brutalism, more than any concrete building constructed on the cheap.

The Theatre, however, has suffered from its association with bad architecture. The impetus for the creation of an arts complex in the downtrodden southeastern area of London was a laudable one on the part of the South Bank Board, the London County Council, and later the Greater London Council, but the site has been subject to an exhausting array of plans for redevelopment ever since the scheme was originally conceived.⁵⁵ The Hayward Gallery has been criticized for its construction difficulties: unused spaces and walkways, confusing entrances and exits, and the aesthetically offending mixing of pedestrian traffic with vehicular traffic. “Who

⁵⁴ HRH Prince Charles. *A Vision of Britain: A Personal View of Architecture*. London: Doubleday, 1989, pp. 45.

⁵⁵ “South Bank Centre.” <www.wikipedia.org> The site lists the various plans for renovation that have been proposed for the South Bank Centre, from Richard Rogers’s unexecuted plan for a glass roof to cover the Hayward, the Queen Elizabeth Hall and the Purcell Rooms, to the 2000 plan for the development of the Hungerford Bridge Car Park.

would guess that these gloomy bunkers were built to celebrate the pleasures of the senses?”

Lionel Esher asked in 1981. “The Hayward Gallery is London’s most unloved building.”⁵⁶

However, with the three auditoria, each suited to the needs of a particular mode of drama, the National Theatre’s interiors and exteriors serve their functions as performance spaces and civic monuments better than the composition of the Hayward Gallery. Unfortunately, as William Curtis puts it—and what seems to be the reigning characteristic of so-called Brutalist architecture

The various reactions to the National Theatre [illustrates how] architecture is perceived and received through cultural filters, and is described and judged through different codes and conventions. The same building was seen as an urban landscape, a noble monument, a brutalist creation from the 1960s, a white elephant, a National Car Park, etc. etc. Bare concrete, embodying Lasdun’s ‘primitivist’ intentions...could excite instant and immediate prejudice, as if there were no distinctions to be made between the National Theatre and any other streaky grey building, or as if concrete itself must be automatically ugly.⁵⁷

By examining the unique qualities of Denys Lasdun’s building—how it serves its function, and the importance of its purpose for the culture and character of the British urban landscape—one can appreciate its subtle qualities and striking beauty. The National Theatre was conceived as part of a social project, like many of the educational buildings and housing projects that proliferated during this period, but the Theatre’s purpose to serve the arts sets it apart from conventional 1960s visions of a progressive utopia. It is a building that both reflects its times and is a monument to the timeless power of art; it reflects culture while serving and creating it.

The scheme to build a National Theatre along the South Bank of the river Thames germinated in the minds and the London government well before the establishment of the Tate Modern in Southwark made that part of the city fashionable. After the success of the Festival of Britain exhibition and the construction of the Royal Festival Hall in 1951, the London County Council sought to re-establish this under-developed area of the city as a cultural mecca. The plan for a National Theatre and Opera House project (NTOP) east of Waterloo Bridge would

⁵⁶ Esher, Lionel. *A Broken Wave: The Rebuilding of England 1940-1980*. London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1981, pp. 110.

⁵⁷ Curtis, William J.R. *Denys Lasdun: Architecture, City, Landscape*. London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 1994, pp. 193

help revive this industrial part of the city by lending it an air of cultural importance: after all, on the South Bank Board sat luminaries like Laurence Olivier and Kenneth Tynan, each individually invested in the continued success of Britain's theatrical tradition and its dissemination into public life beyond London's wealthier districts. As Lionel Esher explains, "the whole long bend from Vauxhall Bridge down to Southwark Bridge had been declared a Comprehensive Development Area after the war, and it was seen by all as a test of our capacity to do something splendid in the heart of London."⁵⁸ A bill urging the creation of a National Theatre passed Parliament in 1948, but it was not until 1967 that the plan would begin to become a reality.

The selection of Lasdun as the architect the project came to some as a surprise—not only was he an unapologetically "Modern" architect, using concrete cantilevers and clusters to engineer modes of social behavior, like his 1960s counterparts, but he had never designed a theatre. Though his earlier projects such as the Royal College of Physicians in Regent's Park (1960) and the University of East Anglia in Norwich (1962-1968) (**Figure 4.3**) had garnered much praise, the building of a theatre complex presented Lasdun with many challenges of engineering and aesthetics. In the theatre building, the spaces for drama and the inner-workings of the stage have to be perfect with optimal acoustics and lines of sight. Rather than creating an architecture of permanence directed towards a relatively fixed set of users who would define the structure's function in the same ways—i.e., like dwellers in a housing estate or students in a school—theatergoers changed every evening, had to be correctly directed where to travel through and where to congregate, and had to be separated from those involved with theatrical production, who used the building in more or less the same fashion every day. Lasdun took these challenges to heart and created a structure that uses motion and change as part of its

⁵⁸ Esher, pp. 110.

permanent ornamentation. The peerless ingenuity and grandeur of its exterior is matched only by the functionality of its interior. As a temple to the tradition of British literature and drama, the National Theatre's architecture is indeed an appropriate expression of architectural principles. Simply because revivals of great British dramas are performed on the building's three stages does not mean that the building itself has to be a revival of great British architecture. Rather, it is a fitting monument the continued relevance of the arts—both through its function as a theatre and as a piece of brilliant architecture. As Mark Giroud comments, “The [theatre] was designed under the influence not only of individual theatres from Epidaurus to the Globe, but of Classical and Renaissance theories of the theatre as a microcosm, a little model of the world connected by its architecture to something bigger than itself.”⁵⁹ The National Theatre bridge between the concerns of the 1960s and the history of British theatre, and supports drama with an interconnected space for narrative, ideas, feelings and people by virtue of its architectural language.

Lasdun's original plans, however, were not without problems. Throughout the early stages of his sketching process, starting from late 1963, the increasingly cash-poor British government dropped the plan for the Opera House portion of the project, eviscerating Lasdun's original design for two interlocking buildings. Without the Opera House to complement Lasdun's design for the National Theatre, the Shell Tower looming over the site would seriously alter Lasdun's vision; it would “amputate” it.⁶⁰ In response, a new site, further east and connected to Waterloo Bridge was then offered. Lasdun met the needs of this new location and its aesthetic connection to the bridge (**Figure 4.4**) in stride. Excited about the opportunities presented by the new positioning of his project, he remarked, “it's at a point in the river called

⁵⁹ Giroud, Mark. “Cosmic Connections,” from *The National Theatre: 'The 'Architectural Review' Guide*, ed. Colin Amery. London: The Architectural Press Ltd., 1977, pp. 5.

⁶⁰ Ibid., pp. 7.

Kings Reach, which turns through almost 90 degrees and picks up a panorama of the City of London that stretches from St. Paul's round to Somerset House and on to Hawksmoor's towers at Westminster Abbey. It's a magical position...probably the most beautiful site in London."⁶¹

Additionally, with Wren's magnificent St. Paul's Cathedral across the river to the east, and the West End of London—the city's traditional theatre district—across Waterloo Bridge, Lasdun recognized the unique opportunity offered by the triangular relationship of architecture and history at the new site. When the Theatre opened to the public in 1976, they were greeted by a symphony of projecting concrete cantilevers and balconies that seemed to emerge naturally from the ground and the dark depths of the river Thames. Additionally, the drama of the building's original white color has evolved over the years by the natural staining process that affects concrete as time goes on. The National Theatre was thus a paradox: a modernist, brutalist monument that took its aesthetic cues from the beauty of geometry, yet also a palimpsest that reflected the grandeur and traditions of theatre and art history. Lasdun remarked

We have tried to offset the current skepticism about the permanent housing of institutionalized culture and the doubts about architectural form-making by a response away from the isolated monument and towards an architecture of urban landscape. It is an architecture without façades but with layers of building, like geological strata, connected in such a way that they flow into the surrounding riverscape and city. The building is thus an extension of the theatre into the everyday world from which it springs. The strata inside and outside are the basic vocabulary. They seem to capture the fundamental sense of theatre as a place of gathering and they provide a framework for the experience of visiting the theatre which takes the city itself as its backdrop.⁶²

The National Theatre speaks the language of natural landscape and built environment; it attempts to communicate both with its users and with its surroundings. The gradual layering of volumes and space on top of each other, in between the physical realities of the stacks of concrete make visible portions of views of the city that would be impossible without the building; the view below from the upper tiers swarm with the magic of human traffic. The National Theatre is a

⁶¹ www.nationaltheatre.org.uk

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 11.

monolith of poured concrete, but it is fully alive. It changes with each passing day and each passing visitor who leaves his or her mark on it.

The Theatre itself is composed of three separate auditoria: the Olivier Theatre, a grand tiered structure, built specifically for the performances of classical works, Shakespearean plays, and some contemporary dramas; the Lyttleton proscenium, suited for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century drama, and the open Cottesloe Theatre for experimental theatre. In each space, Lasdun plays with our expectations of theatre architecture: our experience of a play depends as much on our experience of his environment as it does on the individual production or the quality of the actors. In the Olivier, Lasdun heightens dramatic effect by exaggerating the contrast between the darkness of the theatre during performance and the bright whiteness of the exterior concrete shell: though the walls are painted black for maximum visual impact, the Oliver's roof shell is broken and shattered into hundreds of concrete squares containing light fixtures. As Giroud points out, not only does this "shattering" effect maintain proper acoustics and optimal lighting conditions for the actors on stage, but "it suggests an aesthetic of broken forms which is taken up by the jaggedly broken concrete walls of the side tiers,"⁶³ thus synchronizing with the asymmetrical layers of concrete on the exterior. **(Figure 4.5)** The Lyttleton proscenium, which depends upon the presence of a stage frame to separate the world of the play from the world of the audience, is rectangular rather than curved as the Olivier is. All three interiors are surmounted by a series of flytowers and slender verticalities on the exterior; Lasdun has made it difficult to discern where each element of the building begins and ends. The glass of the windows produce stunning effects of light and shadow from both the interior and exterior positions, lending the building's cantilevers and hallways a sense of dynamic movement. Rather than remaining static, the National Theatre seems to hover in space; it shifts depending on a

⁶³ Giroud, Mark. "Cosmic Connections," pp. 5.

visitor's perspective of the concrete slabs or the honeycomb-shaped coffers on their undersides (**Figure 4.6**); it alters atmospherically depending on the weather. As Curtis states, "The result is a monument that is also a non-monument—a building that splices together hieratic formula with a deliberate openness and availability."⁶⁴

It is this openness of form and purpose that distinguishes the National Theatre from other less well conceived civic buildings of this period, and that justifies its defense. Despite the political implications of the government establishing which spaces are suitable for cultural importance and deciding what kinds of values should be incorporated within different cultural institutions, Lasdun's National Theatre avoids any accusations of elitism by as egalitarian in form as it is in purpose. In nodding to the historical example of Epidaurus for the design of the Olivier, where the tiers of banked seats seem to converge upon the horizon of the stage, Lasdun has emphasized the importance of humanism for both theatre and architecture. His building, accessible from many possible angles and accommodating many routes extends the metaphor of artistic accessibility to all people—whether those who have come to the theatre from the comforts of Belgravia or those who have walked from a Southwark high-rise. The formal elements of the building "give visual expression to the essentially public nature of the institution: for a theatre must be a place where human contact is enriched and a common experience is shared."⁶⁵ In the darkened recesses of the Lyttleton, Cottesloe and Olivier Theatres during a performance, or in one of the brightly-lit gathering spaces during intermission, Lasdun has achieved a kind of communication with both the materiality of architecture—the honesty of the materials as found—and the site upon which the architecture relies. Lasdun's attention to every detail of the interior's decoration—from the use of purple, brown and grey colors in carpets and

⁶⁴ Curtis, William J.R. *Denys Lasdun: Architecture, City, Landscape*, pp. 136.

⁶⁵ Curtis, William J.R. *A Language and a Theme: The Architecture of Denys Lasdun and Partners*. London: RIBA Publications Ltd, 1976, pp. 16.

furniture that match the exterior topography of the site, to specially designed light fixtures and door handles—further demonstrates his concern for making the experience of architecture culturally fulfilling, illustrating the architect’s ingenuity. The National Theatre building confronts the controversies of late capitalism—the challenges leveled against cultural institutions for being prescriptive—by simply existing as noble and grand architecture in tune with human experience and the natural world.

So is the National Theatre a Brutalist building? Lasdun’s evident dislike for the label and his overarching attempts to create different episodes of experience within the built environment transcend the bounds of term Brutalism, but the use of concrete as the dominant aesthetic and the concern for the materials and ethos established by the British avant-garde are well served by the building. However, if the Hayward Gallery—which is regularly criticized for its “lack of public amenities, educational facilities and storage spaces [and existence of] unusable sterilized space”⁶⁶—can confidently be called a Brutalist building, how can a superior building like the National Theatre also have the same name?

The National Theatre is a building that remains evocative of the same mood, style and ethos of the 1950s and 1960s, the same that encouraged the Smithsons to move away from the compromising Modernism of their predecessors in favor of something honest, raw and fresh. The National Theatre was never conceived without its stated function in mind, and strives to serve its purpose as well as possible without sacrificing any of the innovative elements of its design. Indeed, form here follows function to the utmost: Lasdun’s vision of what theatre should mean as a cultural exercise for all men and women is echoed in the concrete and glass design. Brutalism is at once a derisive term that can be applied to the Hayward Gallery: a building unfeeling and cold; dysfunctional and anonymous, that adds little, as we see from the *Burlington*

⁶⁶ South Bank Centre. *Designing the Future of the South Bank*. London: Academy Editions, 1994, pp. 9.

Magazine's account, to the art inside. However, Brutalism at its most sincere is still an apt term for the architecture of Denys Lasdun, if it means an architecture concerned with formulating the most honest experience of the built environment by matching the roughness and complexities of both the theatre and daily life. The term "Brutalist" as a denigrating label is understandable when confronted by the uninspired aesthetics of the Hayward Gallery, it remains disingenuous to decry all such buildings that use an aesthetic of raw power to convey their message. Denys Lasdun's vision of a theatre linking separate spheres of existence into one theatre of experience has been fulfilled by the forms of the National Gallery; it transcends the limits of labels while simultaneously exemplifying the virtues of the Brutalist ethos.

Images



Figure 4.1: Royal Festival Hall (1951) and London Eye at night, with view of Big Ben. These are some of the buildings that comprise the South Bank Arts Centre complex, which also includes the Hayward Gallery, the Purcell Rooms and the Queen Elizabeth Hall. *(Photograph courtesy of the Google Image Gallery)*



Figure 4.2: Greater London Council Architecture Department, Hayward Gallery. London, 1968. Can 46% of structural engineers be wrong when they call this “the ugliest building in Britain?” *(Photograph courtesy of the Google Image Gallery)*



Figure 4.3: University of East Anglia, Norfolk Halls of Residence. Denys Lasdun, 1962-1968. The distinctive “ziggurat” style of these buildings set Lasdun and his vision of architecture apart from his contemporaries.
(Photograph courtesy of Wikipedia.)



Figure 4.4: The National Theatre, exterior. (Denys Lasdun, 1967-1976) *(Photograph by Arcaid/Richard Bryant)*

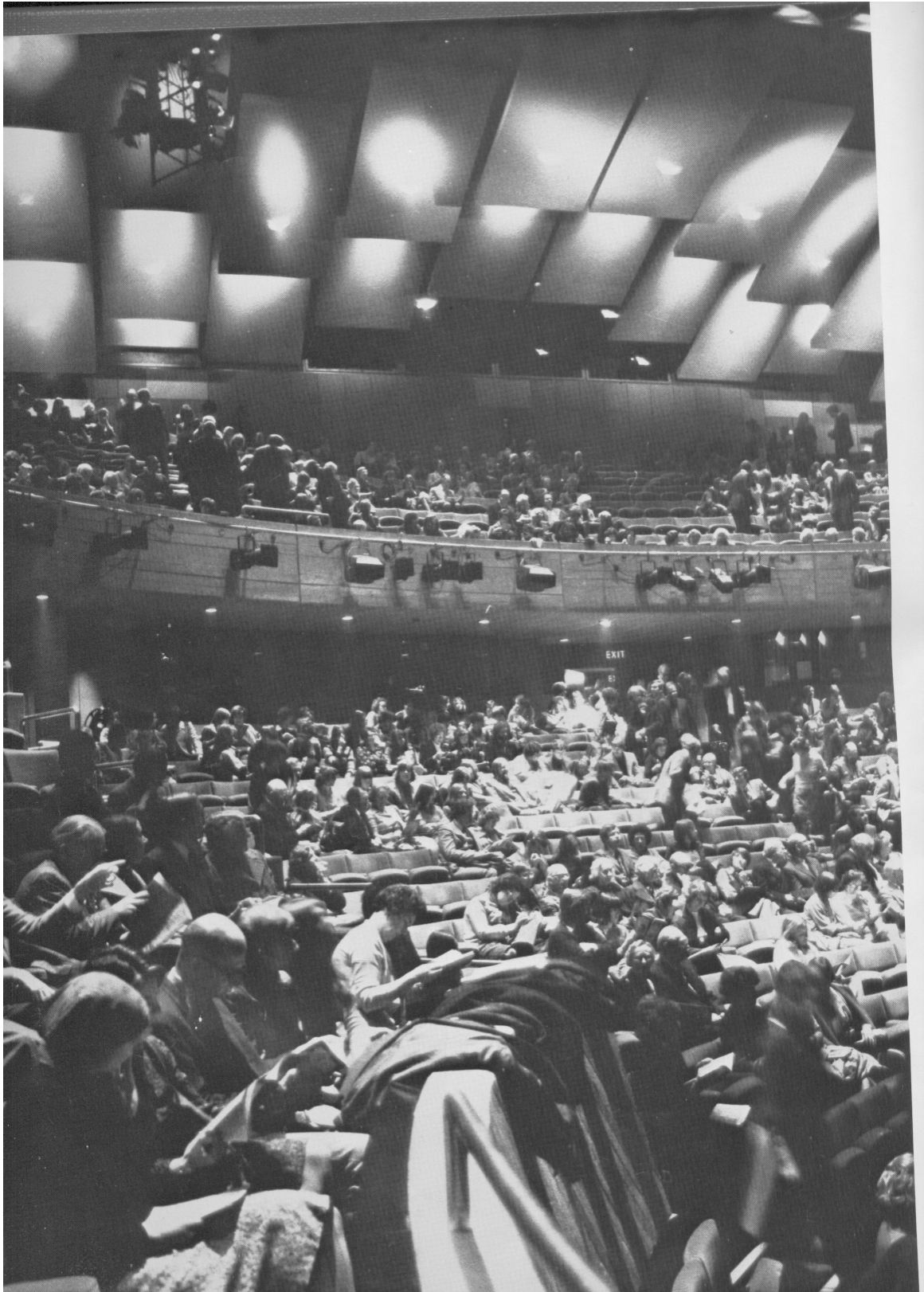


Figure 4.5: Olivier Theatre auditorium during performance. (*Photograph by Mark Giroud, copyright 1976*)

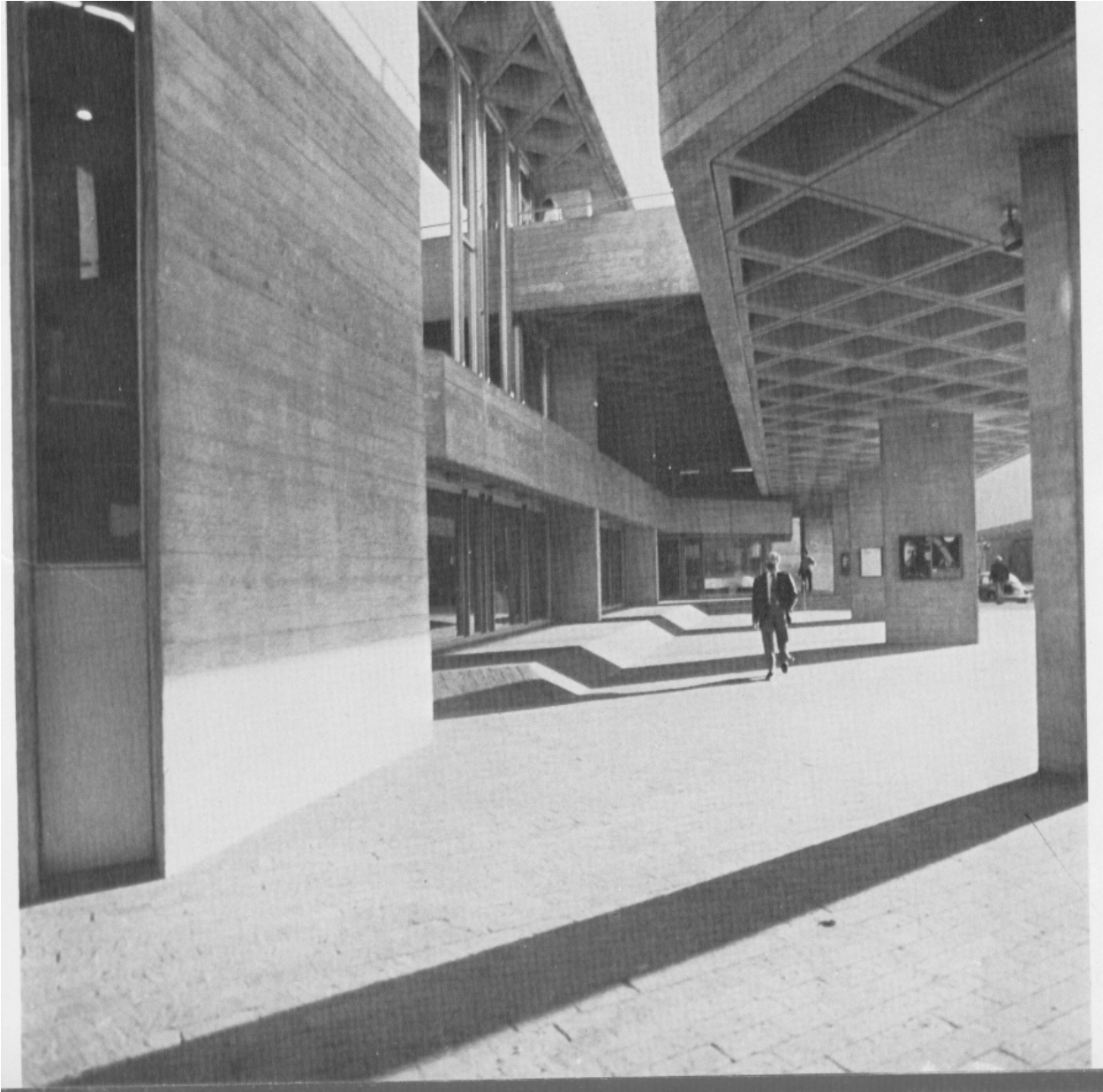


Figure 4.6: Underneath the coffered cantilevers, National Theatre.
(*Photograph courtesy of the Architectural Review Guide, 1977*)

*Brutalism and British Architectural Heritage: Don't Look Back
in Anger*⁶⁷

The responses to Brutalist architecture in Britain, and to modern architecture as a whole, have elicited opinions on the subject of its restoration from both ends of the spectrum. There are those, like the producers of Channel 4's *Demolition* series, who argue that the experiments of modern architecture have failed functionally and aesthetically. The creation of an X-list, argue George Ferguson and Kevin McCloud, will liberate the British landscape and city skylines from unsightly structures. Catherine Croft of the Twentieth Century Society, however, urges the sensitive renovation of Brutalist buildings that have fallen into dereliction. Lamenting the destruction of Owen Luder's Tricorn Centre office block (1965—2004) in Portsmouth, she claims, "[Brutalist architects] were brave artists...the Tricorn could have been mixed use office and shops."⁶⁸ Instead, the Tricorn and many other Brutalist icons have been reduced to rubble during the last two decades.

Some of the criticisms leveled against Brutalist architecture, as we have seen, are indeed warranted. Reinforced concrete, for all of its structural integrity and material honesty, ages dramatically over time. The natural dampness of the British climate discolors concrete and leaves it hard to restore to its original pristine appearance; even though some like the patterns created by aged concrete, it too often can look dingy and unappealing. Additionally, modernist and Brutalist buildings often find themselves at the center of legal and political battles that have little to do with architecture itself. In a recent *Architectural Review* editorial, Geoff Rich

⁶⁷ John Osborne's famous 1956 play *Look Back in Anger* is considered one of the key texts of the "Angry Young Man" movement in British literature of the post-war period. The Manchester band Oasis wrote their response to the play's themes of working-class life in their 1994 single "Don't Look Back in Anger."

⁶⁸ Jeffries, Stuart. "The Joy of Concrete." *Guardian Unlimited* (London), March 15, 2004

examines the problems inherent in the restoration of modernist buildings, all of which have affected the perception of Brutalist architecture in Britain today. He writes

There is not the same level of public empathy for the conservation of Modern buildings as many people have negative and strongly held prejudices about Modern architecture. In practical terms, Modern buildings are also challenged by changing standards of environmental regulations. Large areas of glass and structures with low thermal mass mean that operation efficiency and sustainability ratings are becoming increasingly unfavorable. The land on which they were built may now attract new functions or more valuable development opportunities, adding significant pressure for physical change or total redevelopment...Add this to the effects of some naïve (albeit pioneering) detailing, experimental use of materials and over-ambitious structural design, and the rate of decline...is thus accelerated. Equally, misguided and ad-hoc maintenance can also destroy a building's design aesthetic.⁶⁹

While Birmingham's Bull Ring or Luder's maligned Tricorn Center in Portsmouth may have been built with the purpose of improving daily life in mind, they serve as remnants of Britain's past that many would rather forget. The physical difficulties of rehabilitating decrepit Brutalist buildings, such as Cumbernauld's run-down Town Centre complex outside of Glasgow, merely add to public distaste for such buildings. Not only have the designs of Brutalist architectures failed and been dismissed as structurally and aesthetically impractical, but often they have failed in their attempts to provide the British public with meaningful public spaces. Cumbernauld's Town Centre has fallen in estimation in the eyes of the public because of its original design flaws and its deteriorating exterior façade, but more importantly, it is maligned because it failed to provide the people of Cumbernauld with a functioning, mixed-use community center. Function has failed form.

The condition of life in Britain after the post-war period, and the optimism engendered by the economic boom and the rise of British popular culture and its connection to Brutalist architecture, have not eclipsed the memories of a political climate equally associated with Brutalist architecture and its social aims. "Brutalism had become a symbol of our high-taxing, high-spending, centralized, nationalized nanny state," William Cook wrote in *The New*

⁶⁹ Rich, Geoff. "Modern Matters." *Architectural Review* (London), February 2006, pp. 40

Statesman, “grimly determined to give us what it thought was best for us, from council flats to subsidized theatre, whether we wanted it or not.”⁷⁰ The changing political landscape of Britain helped to convert the physical landscape from subsidized housing projects associated with Labour Party socialist-inclusiveness to smaller, privatized and nostalgic dwellings manufactured by the Thatcherite government. Rather than wanting to live in self-sufficient units in apartment buildings reaching into the sky, evocative of the Labour’s government’s socialist fantasies for equality amongst Britain’s myriad socioeconomic classes, desire returned for living in a semi-detached house with a private back garden. Popular culture reflects this change: after all, the working-class characters on Britain’s most-watched soap operas *Coronation Street* and *EastEnders* don’t live in tower blocks; they live in terraced houses in Manchester and Victorian townhouses in London.

It was in this climate of conservatism and privatization that the aesthetics of Brutalism fell out of favor as much as the ethical program associated with it did. Even though the “Cool Britannia” of Tony Blair’s New Labour movement (1997—present) helped to re-ignite intellectual interest in Brutalist architecture, and thus helped to lead to the renovations of the National Theatre, the Hayward and the Barbican, for many people the specter of social ills and anxieties linked to the 1960s and 1970s remain encapsulated within these buildings. Brutalism is an undeniably significant movement in the history of Britain’s architectural development, but its politics remain for many unhappy ones. Rather than reminding the British public of the optimism and avant-garde theorizing exemplified by the hyper-intellectual Smithsons and the artistic circle surrounding the Independent Group which would eventually lead to the rise of pop art and Swinging London, the stern exteriors of Brutalist architecture signify unsuccessful social experiments. While the postmodern pastiche of Poundbury may not satisfy British appetites for

⁷⁰ Cook, William. “A Bit Rough.” *The New Statesman* (London), June 24, 2002.

meaningful urban spaces, the social problems that afflicted buildings like Trellick, values that today might be considered as hopelessly naïve and unfashionable, proliferate throughout Brutalist theory and philosophy.

However, philosophical and theoretical naiveté do not have to be derided. Brutalist architectural philosophy developed in a Britain that was “pluralist,” in William Curtis’s terms⁷¹, and on the brink of becoming one of the most diverse countries in Europe, yet certain values and concerns for quality of life transcended political, cultural and economic differences. Essential to Brutalist architecture were “new social values, the cross-breeding of the international modern movement with national traditions [and] the relative human and architectural importance of technology.”⁷² Brutalist architecture in Britain represented a nation in a state of flux: picking itself up from near-destruction and attempting to find a place within itself for art and beauty. The aesthetics and ethics of Brutalist architecture can be seen as a means of grappling metaphorically with Theodor Adorno’s pessimistic conclusion that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.”⁷³ Within the potential for technology to cause great destruction, as seen from the Nazi war machine, there also exists in the material of science the ability to create great beauty. The evolution of a Brutalist design ethics and aesthetics demonstrates the human capacity to create great art from unlikely sources, with the concern for the human being always in mind. **(Figure 5.1)**

Stuart Jeffries explains the strange relationship Brutalism has with the members of the British public. “Brutalism was something I grew up with...It was like having a depressive but not totally unlovable older brother who was always there...inert, sullen, and communicating only

⁷¹ Curtis, William J.R. *Modern Architecture Since 1900*, 3rd ed. London: Phaidon Press Ltd., pp 545.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Adorno, Theodor, ed. Rolf Tiedman. “Cultural Criticism and Society,” from *Can One Live After Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003, pp. 162.

a barely scrutable sarcasm.”⁷⁴ This attitude continues to dog the reputation of Brutalist architecture, and it will remain until organizations in Britain concerned with the built environment recognize the original importance and intentions behind Brutalist monuments. Brutalism was conceived by brilliant architects eager to prove themselves on the world stage; the success of the Smithsons’ career, Denys Lasdun and the rescue of the Trellick Tower’s image bespeak the importance of these buildings. However, if more groups like the Twentieth Century Society can persuade the British public that Brutalist architecture is a crucial part of British heritage, then the label “Brutalist” can be rescued from its derogatory connotations.

Unfortunately for the movement’s original visionaries, like Reyner Banham and his search for an *architecture autre*, “Brutalism” became co-opted by those who had neither the artistic abilities to make the innovative aspects of Brutalism function in architecture, and those who opportunistically saw it as a way of skirting on building costs for their own profit. However, the examination of Brutalism’s merits by way of its most successful monuments illustrates how the theories behind it were pioneering and vital. The British public must recognize this central point of their history and heritage—the way Brutalist architecture meant to make their country look—and defend it against those who see it as a barrier to their vision of Britain as insincere and superficial.

⁷⁴ Jeffries, Stuart. “The Joys of Concrete.” *Guardian Unlimited* (London), March 15, 2004.

Images



Figure 5.1: Towers and flowers, or my personal vision of Britain. High-rise tower blocks rub shoulders seamlessly with Georgian terraces and semi-detached houses. Queen's Park, Glasgow, February 2005.

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